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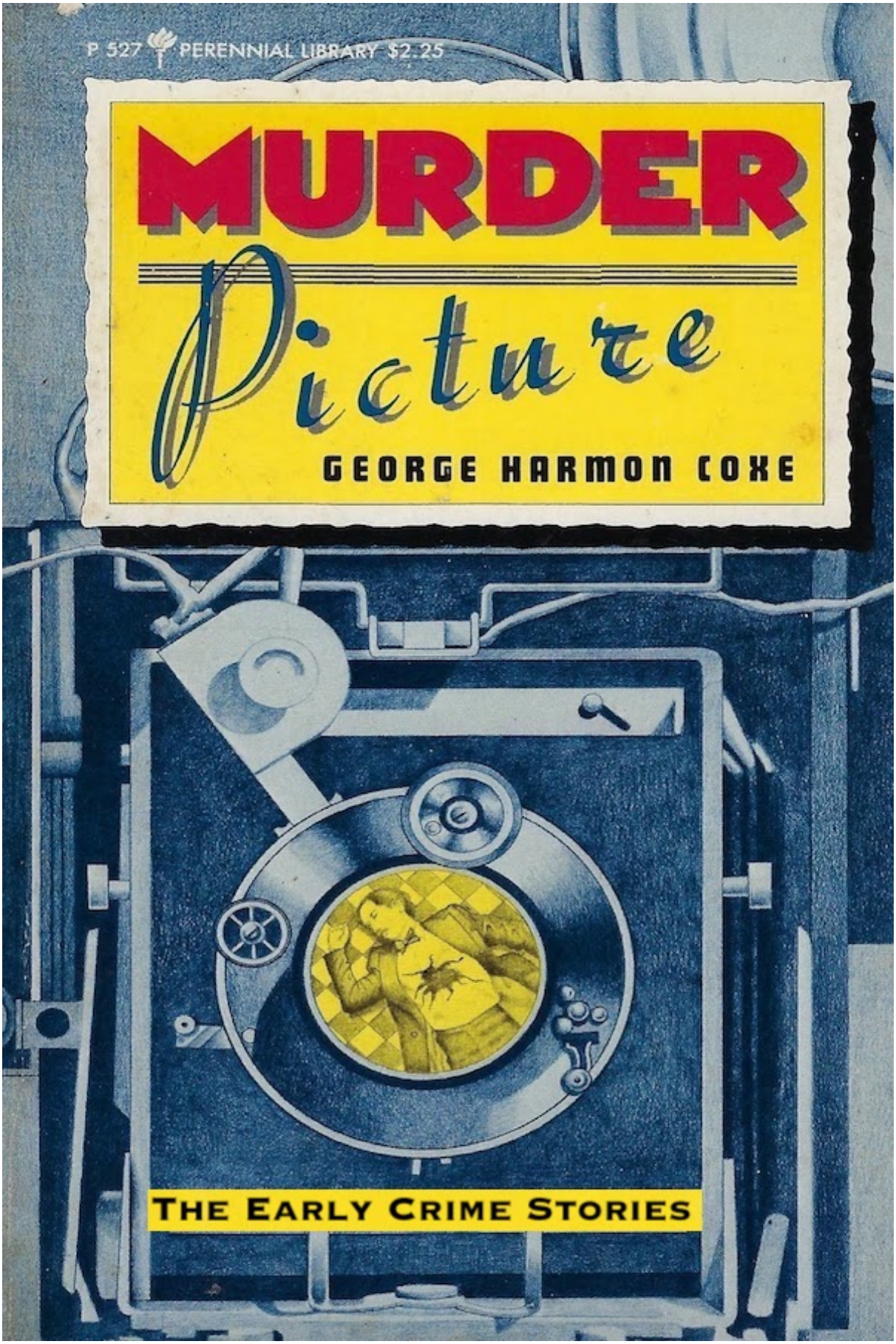
MURDER Picture

GEORGE HARMON COXE



THE EARLY CRIME STORIES

MURDER PICTURE

The Early Crime Stories

George Harmon Coxe

BLACK MASK

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IT CAN BE NO surprise that George Harmon Coxe (1901-1984) began his career as a newspaperman, since his two major literary creations, Jack "Flashgun" Casey (mostly known as "Flash" Casey) and Kent Murdock were both photo-journalists.

Casey came first, created for Black Mask in 1934. A secondary character here to young reporter Tom Wade, he quickly moves to the fore, accompanied by his young sidekick on a regular basis. There were more than twenty "Flash" Casey stories and five novels.

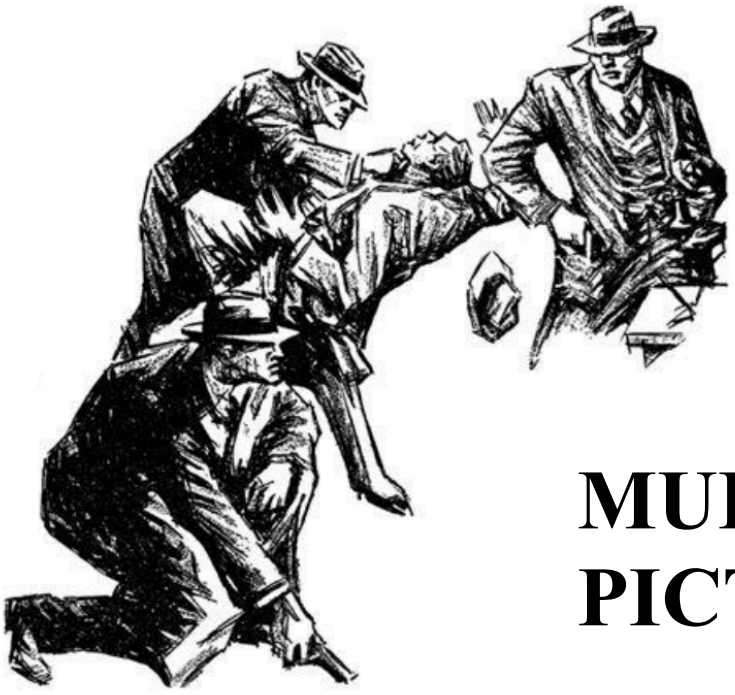
Murdock, very much like Casey but not as tough or violent, made his debut the following year in the novel Murder with Pictures (1935). Although Casey is the better-known character, Murdock appeared in many more novels (twenty-one in all), the first of which was filmed in 1936 with Lew Ayres playing the hero.

One unusual aspect of both series is that most of the adventures feature private detectives but, unlike virtually all other fiction in Black Mask and the other pulps, they are bad guys, frequently hired by villains to protect their evil interests.

While the earliest stories are much in the Carroll John Daly school of "shoot first, ask questions later," they soon became more cerebral, especially the Murdock tales, as murders and their solutions tended to involve technological devices rather than merely a bullet in the skull.

"Murder Picture" was first published in Black Mask in the issue of January 1935.

BLACK MASK



MURDER PICTURE

George Harmon Coxe

It was a picture that spelled dynamite for Flash Casey, with the fuse all set and burning

ASEY, ace photographer of the *Globe*, Flash Casey, as everyone from the copy boy to Captain Judson of the Homicide Squad called him, stood scowling down at a photographic enlargement spread on the table before him.

Big shoulders hunched above his lean waist, reddish hair ruffled, eyes narrowed and frowning, he cursed in a steady monotone of disgust.

The little man at the corner desk, busy making records of his prints, stopped work long enough to glance over at the big cameraman and grin.

"Whatsa bellyache, Flash?"

"Plenty," Casey growled. He rapped a big, bony fist on the barely dried photo. "Here I get an inside tip on that racetrack layout raid and me and Wade crash in just as they are pulling it. I shoot one—this one." The fist rapped again. "Then Haley and his pals throw us out. I knew there must be something more we missed, so I duck in a back way and shoot another through the washroom door, and this time the cops steal the plate off me before they put me out again."

"Well, ain't that one you got any good?"

"A pip, but that other one musta—"

"Hell," the little man said, fretfully, "Blaine don't *have* to know there was another one, does he?"

A slow grin drove the scowl from Casey's homely, strong features.

"You're saying something, Tim. He don't *have* to—unless he asks me. Guess I better get it in to him."

He gathered up the print and started towards the door.

"And tell him how good it is," the little man jeered. "Aw, you guys make me—"

The jangling telephone bell cut him off.

Casey, passing it, took up the receiver.

"Yeah—Casey."

The voice of Lieutenant Logan of the Homicide Squad answered him.

"Listen, Flash. I just talked with Haley. He tells me you sneaked into the washroom of that race-track dive."

"What about it?"

"Did you come across the airshaft—from the Blue Grass Products office?"

"Yeah, but—"

"I'm down there now. I want to see you."

"When? I'm busy and—"

"I don't care a damn whether you're busy or not. Get out here right away or I'll send somebody after you."

Casey said: "Aw—" and pronged the receiver.

His eyes were thoughtful as he walked into the city room, but lighted up as he approached the city editor.

Casey said: "Boy, this is a honey," and laid the eight by ten photographic enlargement on Blaine's desk.

The city editor pushed up in his chair, slid his forearms across the desk top and glanced at the print. It was an exceptionally clear reproduction of the interior of a race-track layout, taken a few seconds after the police had staged a raid an hour previous.

The camera had caught the major part of the room, with its blackboards, loud speaker, cashier's cage; most of the milling crowd of forty or fifty people, half of them women. Casey, a look of satisfaction on his thick face, leaned down and pointed to specific features of the picture, as though he was afraid Blaine would miss them.

"There's Captain Judson," he said, "and Haley, the louse." He moved his forefinger to a stocky man with a white, fatty face who was just coming out of a door on which the word, *Men*, was barely legible. "And get a load of Mike Handy."

Casey's forefinger moved to a smartly dressed and obviously frightened lady who had thrown one arm around the neck of a plump young man with a tiny mustache: Lee Fessendon, son of the new owner of the *Globe*, brother of the managing editor. A fellow

who, though married, continued to retain his reputation of man-about-town.

"Young Fessendon." Casey's voice was humorously disgusted. "Takin' an afternoon off." He straightened up, grunted. "Made a hell of a fuss about it, wanted the plate."

Blaine leaned back in his chair and his clasped hands made a cradle for the nape of his neck.

"This all you took?" he said finally.

"It ain't all I took." Casey's mouth dipped at the corners and his brows knotted in a scowl as he thought of the second picture he had taken, of the trouble he had surmounted to get it.

"But it's all I got," he growled. "Haley and a couple of his dicks took the other one away from me."

His brows flattened out. "But what's the matter with that one? It's exclusive—and it's good, ain't it?"

"Very good," said Blaine sardonically. "Very good indeed; only we can't use it."

"Can't use it?" Casey exploded. "Who says we can't?"

Blaine would have been poor copy for the movies. He did not look the part. He was too well dressed, and he had no eyeshade. Slender, distinguished looking with his prematurely gray hair, he had a lean, hawklike face and small gray eyes that met Casey's in a cold, contemptuous stare.

"I do," he said, and his voice was thin, abrupt.

"Oh." Casey's eyes narrowed. "So that's how it is?" He thrust his hands deep in his trousers pockets, brought his chin down on his chest and surveyed Blaine from under bushy brows. "If anybody'd told me this an hour ago, I'd called him a liar."

"Told you what?" said Blaine irritably.

Casey made no direct answer. Leaning stiff armed on the desk, he made a bulky figure with a thick, upward-arching chest, and tousled hair that was peppered with gray at the temples and too long at the back. A squarish face, set, thin-lipped now, held dark eyes that were narrowed and smoldering.

"The only thing I ever liked about you," he said flatly, "was that you played ball. You protected confidential channels, but you never

squashed a story or picture because it was about a friend of somebody's Aunt Emma. But Fes-sendon's got your number, huh? When he cracks the whip—"

"You interest me," sneered Blaine.

Casey pointed at the picture on the desk. "Lee Fessendon got caught out of school with one of his women. He's scared to take a bawling out from his wife, huh?"

He made noises in his throat and shook his head. "He tried to talk me out of the plate down there in the hall. But you—you have to humor the boss' brother, huh?"

"Finished?" purred Blaine. And when Casey remained silent, "Satisfied now, are you?"

He leaned forward in his chair, smiled a smile that held no mirth, spoke in a voice that was brittle.

"I don't have to make explanations to a camera. But sometimes I like to humor you, Flash. And I'm going to tell you the answer to this one; because you amuse me, and because it helps illustrate my original and permanent contention— that you are a thick-headed sap."

Blaine reached for one of the telephones on the desk, spoke a few words. When he looked back at Casey, he said:

"You sneaked this picture over on Captain Judson. And the reason we are killing it, sweetheart, is because Judson called Fessendon and told him if we printed it he'd close us out at Headquarters for a month."

"Judson called—" Casey broke off and a slow flush crept into his lean cheeks. His widened eyes looked chagrined, incredulous.

In another moment, J. H. Fessendon, brother of Lee, son of the new owner, and managing editor of the *Globe*, swung through the doorway of a corridor behind the desk. He accepted the photograph from Blaine with a manicured hand, studied it.

Casey's flushed face knotted in a scowl as he watched Fessendon. He did not like him or his pseudo go-getter methods. A plump, baldish man of forty-five: pink skin that looked as if a massage was part of his daily ritual; expensive tweeds, tailored with a tight vest and waistband, as though to control and mold the paunch.

"Yes—yes." Fessendon said crisply. "This must be the one. Too bad we can't use it. Where's the plate?" He glanced at Blaine, who eyed him narrowly, then at Casey. "Get the plate, Casey."

Casey fastened contemptuous eyes on Blaine, wheeled and left the desk. In the photographic department, he asked Tom Wade if he had made an extra print. Wade said he had, and Casey growled:

"Swell. I'll paste it in my diary." At the doorway, he turned. "Put it in my desk."

Fessendon was pacing back and forth beside Blaine's desk, followed by surreptitious glances from the crew in the "slot," the half dozen rewrite men scattered about the city room. Casey handed Fessendon the plate, and he held it up to the light. Grunting in approval, he struck the glass against the corner of the desk. The plate shattered in a dozen pieces. Then Fessendon tore up the print.

"Got to make sure," he said easily, picking up the pieces and dropping them in a wastebasket, "got to make sure, you know."

Blaine turned in his chair and watched Fessendon through the doorway, as did every other eye in the room. When he turned back, he met Casey's humid, searching gaze for a moment, and his face flushed. Then he busied himself with some copy, said:

"Don't stand there gawking. If you got legitimate shots we'd have something to print."

Casey opened his mouth and rage kept it open. But he did not speak. He could not think of the right thing to say.

2

Tom Wade was talking on the telephone when Casey returned to the anteroom of the photographic department and slid into the chair behind his desk. He lit a cigarette, puffed once, then let it hang from his half opened lips.

The hot anger which streaked through his brain when Fessendon smashed the plate was a smoldering, cancerous growth now. A heaviness that was a mixture of dejection and disappointment weighed upon him. It was not so much the loss of the plate; that had

happened before; it was the way Blaine had let him down—and Fessendon's gesture, as though he could trust neither Casey nor the city editor.

Wade talked for nearly five minutes longer, and when he hung up Casey told him what had happened.

"It's like I told you before," he finished. "The sheet's goin' to seed since Fessendon bought it. And I still think Lee is the guy that gyped us out of the shot. He probably called Blaine and Blaine gave me the song about Judson—"

"That don't sound like Blaine to me," Wade said slowly.

"And Fessendon," Casey rasped. "Bustin' the plate like we was crooks or something." He began to curse, and after a moment said: "Who the hell were you talkin' with so long?"

"Alma Henderson."

"That tramp that was—"

"Wait a minute!" Wade's voice was unnaturally harsh. A blond, round-faced youth with a guileless manner and a happy-go-lucky philosophy, Wade's ordinarily good-natured face was now flushed, his blue eyes snapping.

"Oh," said Casey and his brows came up. "So that's the way it is."

"No," Wade said doggedly, flushing at his burst of temper, "but she's no tramp. She's a good kid and—"

Casey's mind flashed back to the raid. To get the second picture, the one Haley had taken, he and Wade had crashed into the office of the Blue Grass Products, which was separated from the race-track room by an airshaft. Casey had been in the building before, knew there was an air-shaft and had crossed this to get to the men's room of the gambling hall.

Alma Henderson was apparently in charge of the Blue Grass office. It had surprised Casey that Wade knew her, because heretofore the youth had but little time for women. But Casey, intent on getting another picture, dismissed his curiosity and had left Wade arguing with the girl while he crossed the airshaft with his camera.

He said: "She's a good kid, huh? Okey. But she works for the Blue Grass outfit, and Moe Nyberg runs it. A cheap tout, a first-class thug.

Why, the heel; everything he touches stinks. He's probably hooked up with that race-track dive, now that I think of it. And he plays with Mike Handy who runs the biggest gyp stable in the East. So what does that make this Henderson dame?"

"What the hell?" Wade flung out. "A girl's got to eat."

"All right, all right. I don't care. I got troubles of my own."

Casey lit another cigarette, puffed at it until his head was shrouded in blue. But it wasn't all right. Wade was impulsive, and he had a lot to learn. To get mixed up with any woman connected with Nyberg might put him on the skids.

He said: "What did she want?"

"She wants me to come over to her place."

"What for? She knows you're workin', don't she?"

"She's got a story." Wade said jerkily. "She wouldn't tell me over the phone, but she says it's a job for the cops."

"Hah!" rasped Casey. "Then why don't she go down to Headquarters and spill it?"

"Here's why." Wade took a newspaper from his desk, opened it, pointed to a single column head on page 12.

Casey read:

GIRL PRISONER FLEES DOCTOR

Brought to the State Hospital in East Concord Street for a physical examination, Miss Mary Merkle, 21, serving a sentence at the Reformatory for Women until 1937, escaped today from the office of Doctor …

Casey looked up. "I told you she was a tramp."

Wade flushed. "You're wrong, Flash. She gave me part of the story over the phone. She came down from Vermont three years ago. She got mixed up in a bad crowd, there was a raid, she had no near relatives—"

Wade went on with his story and Casey looked at the date line of the paper. May 17th.

"When she escaped," Wade went on, "she had no place to go, so she looked up one of the guys she used to know and he got her a job with Moe Nyberg. If she goes to the cops with her story, bingo. Back to the Reformatory."

"That's probably where she belongs," growled Casey, and was half ashamed of his words when he saw the hurt look in Wade's eyes.

"She's scared, Flash. And"—Wade hesitated, caught his lower lip between his teeth— "I think she wants me to help her out of town."

"You're nuts," Casey said. He looked at the youth, read correctly the stubborn set of the jaw. He spread his hand wearily, said:

"Listen. I gotta go back to Roxbury and see Logan. Something's up. You can go with me. And after that I'll go and see this Henderson dame with you."

Wade shook his head. "She told me to hurry."

"But—" snorted Casey.

"Wait." Wade backed towards the door and his voice was a bit thick. "She's depending on me, says I'm the only one in town she can trust. I told her I'd come and I'm not letting her down—not even for you."

Casey blew out his breath. Guileless as hell. And just as stubborn. Sold on the girl—or her story. He said:

"What's her address?"

"Seven sixty-three Pratt Street."

Casey smiled then and the smile was genuine, tinged with a certain admiration for the youth's earnest loyalty. He said: "Okey, give it a whirl. Only watch your step and remember she works for Moe Nyberg."

When Wade went out, Casey shrugged and picked up his camera and platecase. "I'd better take 'em," he said half aloud. "Logan sounded tough."

Fifteen minutes later, Casey set his camera and case on the floor in front of a door whose upper panel of frosted glass bore the inscription: *Blue Grass Products*, and scowled.

The transverse corridor on the third floor of the ancient and deserted looking office building was empty, ominously quiet, lighted by a single bulb at the far end. A half dozen doors, with upper panels of glass, gave on the hall, and in each case they were dark. The one in front of him was dark, and this he could not understand.

Where the hell was Logan?

Casey sucked at his upper lip, pushed his hat forward and scratched his shaggy nape. He swept the tails of his topcoat aside as he jammed his fists on his hips; then he yanked the hat brim down, said: "Nerts," and banged his fist on the doorframe.

He waited a moment, banged again. Then, although he heard no sound, he happened to glance at the doorknob. It was turning slowly.

Doubt, chilled and gripping, reared up in his brain. He reached quickly for the platecase, but as he straightened up, prepared to retreat, the door came open a three-inch crack.

Casey froze there, an open-mouthed, wide-eyed statue. Surprise, momentary panic, riveted his gaze on that vertical strip of blackness, on the muzzle of a gun which had been thrust forward in the opening so that the dim light of the hall caught the round barrel, burnished it.

For a second or two there was no sound but the sharp suck of Casey's breath as it caught in his lungs. Then the door swung open and a low, matter-of-fact voice said:

"Okey, Flash. Come on in."

Casey exhaled noisily and stepped forward with sweat breaking out on his forehead. The lights of the room went on. Logan moved out of the doorway and Casey cursed, said: "Why you louse!"

He stopped in front of Logan, glared at him, and the lights of the room glistened on the thin film of moisture on his forehead.

"You louse! You scared hell out of me."

"Couldn't be helped," said Logan flatly, making no apology.

“Ah—” Casey brushed his forehead, pushed back his hat. “You knew I was comin’. You called me up, didn’t you? What the hell do —”

“I knew you were coming,” said Logan hol-stering his gun, “but I’m hopin’ we might get some other callers.”

Something in Logan’s cold abrupt tone caught and held Casey’s interest. It was no gag, that gun business. Logan was in dead earnest. And when he got that way—

Casey glanced around. From where he stood, the office was as he remembered it; long, well furnished with a flat-topped desk, a typewriter desk, leather upholstered chairs. The doorway on the right, apparently leading to a connecting office, had been closed this afternoon. It was open now and two detectives stood in the doorway.

Casey recognized the short, stocky fellow with the red face and the heavy chain draped across his bulging vest as Sergeant Manahan. The other fellow was from Headquarters, too, but he did not know his name. He said:

“Well, what’s the act for?”

Logan took him by the arm, walked him out of the entryway so that he could get a full view of the room. Then Casey saw the man on the floor.

Between the little entryway and the cubbyhole, with its washstand and window giving on the airshaft, was a closet. The door of this was open, and the body of a man, lying on his stomach, his face cocked to one side, was half in, half out of the closet, as though he had fallen out when the door was opened.

He was well dressed, his oxford gray topcoat looked new and his shoes were polished. From what Casey could see, the fellow appeared to be about thirty-five, dark-haired, average height. Now there was a definite stiffness about the still form, and in the back a reddish blotch fused with the gray fabric of the coat.

Casey looked at Logan. “Who is he?”

“Grady. A private dick from New York.”

“Shot in the back?”

“Twice—from close range.”

“Where do I come in?” asked Casey, frowning.

“That’s what I want to know,” said Logan. “I want to know all about the horseplay you staged here this afternoon. I may be wrong. But I think this guy was in that closet—dead—when you were in this room.”

Casey’s eyes widened. He stared at Logan, said: “—!” Then he thought about the Henderson woman, and Wade, and some of the color oozed from his face.

“Then she saw it!” he wheezed huskily. “She must’ve seen it. And it was a plant. That’s why she wanted Wade.”

“Keep your pants on,” Logan said bruskly, “and start at the beginning.”

3

Lieutenant Logan, sitting on the massive, flat-topped desk at the end of the room, his arms angling out beside him, propping him up, was a well built fellow with black hair and eyes. About Casey’s age, he had a flair for clothes. His linen was immaculate, so was his police record. Right now he wore spats—and nobody said anything about them either.

“Wait a minute,” he said when Casey told him about the girl—and the telephone call which had summoned Wade. “At the beginning. How’d you get here, what’d you do—everything. I want it all.”

Casey glared at Logan for a moment, then spoke in thick jerky tones.

“I got the tip from Gerry at Headquarters. When Wade and I got downstairs Judson and Haley and their gang were just gettin’ ready to start. We went up the stairs and when they broke down the door I went in behind the cops. I got one picture, then Judson threw me out.”

Casey cursed at the thought, continued rapidly.

“I knew there was an airshaft some place around so Wade and I cut down this other hall. I figured it oughtta be about there, so we

crashed in here; didn't know what it was but took a chance.

"The Henderson dame was alone here. She gave us an argument, looked scared as hell, but Wade talked to her and—"

"The closet was closed," Logan said.

"Yeah," chafed Casey, "so was this other door—to the next office. And anyway I opened the window"—he pointed to the frosted glass pane in the wall of the cubbyhole— "and saw that the window across the shaft was partway open."

He stepped towards a wide shelf which lay on iron brackets on one wall of the cubbyhole. "The dame was arguing all the time, but I found out this shelf was loose, I shoved it across the shaft and it just reached. So I took the camera and slid across. It was the men's room."

"Anybody in it?" asked Logan.

"No. And I went through to the hall, got one picture. But Haley saw me, caught me before I could reach the door. He and a couple of those thugs you call detectives took the plate away from me."

"Did you come back here?"

"Yeah, but"—Casey's thick face cracked in a scowl— "the place was closed."

"Hah!" snapped Logan. "Then what?"

"I couldn't figure it," Casey went on, still scowling, "but I finally found Wade downstairs. He said that the girl was afraid Nyberg might get sore, and it was time to close up anyway, so she chased him out of the office and locked up."

Casey shook his head. Logan waited silently.

"It sounded screwy at the time, but I had other things on my mind. Anyway she wanted Wade to take her downstairs—said she was afraid the cops might think she had been in the gambling place. So Wade took her downstairs. He was out on the street when I found him—the crazy fool. He said a car with a couple tough-looking eggs came along and the dame got in and left him standing there."

"That's all, huh?" Logan asked.

"That's all that happened to me, yeah."

"All right." Logan pushed back his gray felt, pursed his lips, finally said: "It begins to add up. Now I'll tell you my side.

“You’re about the only button pusher I know that’s satisfied to take pictures and leave the police work for the cops. And that’s important this time—because there’s no pictures—no story—tonight. We’re gambling that the killers might come back for the body *if they think the kill is covered.*“

Logan watched Casey drop into a chair, then continued.

“Grady was working for three or four racetracks—the stewards or something. Remember that stink about the horse doping ring a couple years or so ago?” Casey nodded and Logan said: “The Feds were in on that. This is something new.

“Grady was about ready to crack this ring until Dopey Donlan got knocked off a couple days ago.”

“He was in it?” Casey asked.

“Yeah. And that’s why he was killed. Because the big shots were afraid he’d squawk under pressure. He’s a hophead and he probably would.

“But Grady had some dope on that kill. I didn’t know a thing about it till last night. Grady worked under cover until he came down to Headquarters and told me what he had. He said he thought he’d be ready for the showdown today. But you know these private dicks. Afraid we’d steal his stuff. Wouldn’t spill a thing till he was ready.”

Logan shrugged. “Well, he was ready this afternoon. He was the guy that tipped us off to this joint. He had the man he wanted. When he pulled the raid, Judson was to pinch the killer— or the big hot, or somebody.”

Logan slid off the desk and walked over to the body.

“What an idea. He’s cleaned. Nothing on him but his clothes. If he hadn’t come to see me last night, we’d have a hell of a time identifying him at all.”

“How’d you get wise he was here,” said Casey, taking out a cigarette and trying to get his mind off Wade.

“Haley found some blood in that washroom across the way. He found some—just a spot or two—on the window sill. He remembered you being there, looked around, tumbled to this office. But it was locked. I came down. We found him in the closet.”

Casey stood up, began to pace the floor. “Then somebody got him into the washroom from the race-track dive, or followed him in, put the slug on him and”—he stopped, turned to glance at the wide shelf he had used— ”and slid his body across here.”

“Yeah,” said Logan. “And you and Wade busted in. The killers might’ve been in this next office. The girl had to get Wade out. That’s why she got him to go downstairs with her.” Logan’s voice got thin, thready.

“That’s why we’re waiting. If they aren’t wise they’ll come back for the body—I hope. That must’ve been their original plan—to leave it here till tonight. No word got out of this. Judson, Haley, the examiner and us are the only ones that know about it.

“We’ve got a guy that tried to get in that washroom about three or four minutes before the raid. He says the door was locked, that he watched it from then on till the raid. Nobody came out. So that must’ve been the time that Grady got it. Somebody got wise to him —but they couldn’t know about the raid. It just happened to break right after they’d killed him and—”

Logan broke off in surprise as Casey spun towards him with a thick, throaty curse.

“The picture!” Casey’s eyes got bright and glaring. “The one I took first. That’s it. I caught Handy with the camera, *caught him coming out of the washroom a couple seconds after the raid.* He must’ve been in there when the door was locked, and—”

“Wait a minute!” rapped Logan, and grabbed Casey. “What picture—what the hell you talking about?”

Casey told him then. Described the picture he had taken in short, clipped sentences. But he could not keep still when he talked. He had to walk, keep moving, because of the thought that festered in his brain and gave him no peace.

“It’s gotta be that way. And the girl knew Grady was dead—in that closet. She musta told Nyberg and—”

“We got word out to pick Moe up,” Logan interrupted. “We had Handy—and let him go.”

“They must’ve made that Henderson tramp get Wade out to her place,” Casey rushed on, “so they could put the pressure on him.

Maybe force him to get that place. Only—”

Casey broke off and went slack-jawed.

“Only what?” rapped Logan.

“Only there ain’t any plate. Blaine—

Fessendon, the!” Casey explained what had happened. “Those hoods won’t believe the kid when he tells ‘em it’s smashed.”

Logan jerked Casey around. “Take it easy. You got too much imagination. That girl might be on the level. And Wade. Hell, with his kind of dumb luck—”

He broke off as Casey jerked loose and started for the door. He leaped after the big photographer, caught him again.

“Where you goin’?”

“I’m goin’ to that girl’s place and—”

“No you’re not.” Logan’s chin jutted out and his brows drew down. “You’re goin’ down to the *Globe* with me and get that picture first. After that we’ll go.”

Casey put balled fists on his hips and leaned forward so that his chin was three inches from Logan’s nose.

“I am, huh?” he grunted.

“It’s a murder picture,” said Logan. “With that and this other guy’s testimony about the washroom, and the M.E.’s verdict to the time of death—”

“And Judson callin’ in, sayin’ we can’t print it,” flared Casey.

“I don’t know about Judson, but—” Logan began.

“And Blaine,” grated Casey. “If he’d had his way there wouldn’t be any picture. But there is;

I held out on him. And you oughtta be damn’ glad I did. You can have it. But I’m not gonna waste time goin’ to the office now; and you’re not gonna take me down till I find that girl.”

Anger flooded Logan’s face and he started to speak. For just a moment he met Casey’s burning stare; then he backed a step and threw up his hands.

Those black eyes of Logan’s could see beneath many surfaces; and when Casey spoke like that you believed him. Logan believed him now. And strangely enough, his lips twitched in a flicker of a smile.

“If that’s the way it is,” he said caustically, “I guess I’d better go with you.” Turning to Man-ahan he added: “Call Judson. Get a couple more men up here. You may get action yet. But if word of this gets out I’m gonna beat the hell out of you, personally.”

He grabbed Casey, who had already shouldered his platecase, said: “The kid’ll be okey as long as the kill is covered. But that girl. We can use her.”

Pratt Street is a narrow offshoot of Massachusetts Avenue. The sidewalks are narrow and made to look more so because the apartments, seedy looking three and four-story brick structures, jammed close together, are all set right out to the edge of the legal building line.

Seven sixty-three, in the middle of the block, had but two characteristics to distinguish it from its adjoining neighbors and those across the street: its number, and the name *Edgemere*, painted in gilt across its single door.

The tunnel-like entryway was so dark Logan had to strike a match to inspect the name cards above the mailboxes along the right wall. “This is the place, all right,” he said. “Alma Henderson—3-C.”

The inner door was unlocked and the air here seemed hot and stuffy after the chilled sweep of the night outside. They climbed silently, Logan in the lead, and the soft pounding of a steam radiator on the second floor paced their steps up the last flight of stairs.

Three-C was on the right, rear. Logan knocked once, turned the knob. The door was not locked and as he opened it, Casey grunted impatiently and pushed him into the lighted room. Logan took two steps and stopped short and stiff, so that Casey ran into him and heard him breathe a curse.

Casey looked over his shoulder and saw why. Alma Henderson was on the floor by a wide-open window. A crumpled heap of arms and legs and orange dress.

Casey closed the door softly, and automatically. Logan started across the room. Casey remained where he was, glanced about and

became vaguely aware of a cheaply furnished living-room that tried hard to be smart.

Then, because a new indefinable sense of fear reached at his nerve ends with icy fingers, he called: “Wade!” and was instantly aware of the hollowness of his voice, and the absurdity of the act. Wade was not here. Because if he were here—

“Shot her in the back, too,” Logan said bitterly.

Casey lurched across the room. He looked down at the lifeless figure of a girl who was tall, and young, and slender—too slender, and had nice hands. Even in death her face held a youthful prettiness that makeup could not hide.

His gaze held by the discolored spot in the left side of that orange dress, Casey continued to stare at Alma Henderson. But after a moment he was not conscious of what he saw. It was a mental picture that sickened him and he put his thoughts into words.

“She saw Grady killed. She had to go, but before that they got her to spot Wade.”

“That puts the weight on your picture,” Logan said slowly. “It’s not as good as the girl, but she can’t testify.”

“Suppose Wade saw her get it?” Casey spoke as though talking to himself. “You know how that sets him up.”

“If he’s not here, he’s still alive.”

“You look around then,” Casey muttered. “I’ll stay here.”

“Sure,” said Logan, moving away. “It’s gonna be a pleasure to meet up with these guys. In the back. And it looks like she might’ve been trying to open that window.” He cursed softly. “It’s kinda screwy. It don’t look like a planned kill.”

Casey backed away a step, lifted his head and looked out the window. City lights from beyond suffused the drab sky and made a dirty blue background for the rear rooflines of houses in the next block, for spindly antennae, and a potbellied water-tower. A sound of movement behind him flicked his eyes away from the somber picture and he turned.

A man stood beside the doorway to the inner hall. A stocky man with a twisted grin on his broad, sallow face. He had a small automatic in his right hand.

Then Logan came into the room. He had his hands raised shoulder high, and he walked slowly. Behind him came a thin, hollow-chested, ratty-looking youth who held the muzzle of his gun stiffly against Logan's back.

"Just be nice," the stocky man said. "Both of

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The tableau held motionless a second or two; then the thin man's glance slid sidewise to Casey and he jabbed with his gun, spoke to Logan.

"So it's gonna be a pleasure to meet up with us, huh?" He chuckled but his lips were sneering. "Well, the pleasure's all yours. How do you like it?"

Casey felt a thickness in his throat and he cleared it with a grunt, said: "Where's Wade?" ominously.

"Who's Wade?" asked the stocky man and cocked one eyebrow in an expression of mock concern.

"You know who," said Casey huskily and slid one foot forward across the rug.

"Hold it!" clipped the stocky man. "We know how we stand, and if you think you can crowd us, you're nuts."

Casey stopped with his left foot advanced. He was a good eight feet from Logan, ten feet or more from the stocky man. He'd never get that far, and he knew it. He had no weapon, and there was nothing he could get his hands on—except the vase on the gateleg table, and that was back by the wall.

The stocky man pocketed his gun, moved towards the telephone stand near the doorway to the inner hall, said: "Get him away from that phone. I'd better find out what we do with these punks."

The thin man marched Logan forward three steps, and as they stopped Casey watched the lieutenant. The handsome face was set now, and there was a tight, pinched smile on his lips. The smooth skin at his cheekbones was stretched like a banjo head, but it was the eyes that held Casey's gaze.

There was an intense gleam in their dark depths, and, as Casey watched, he saw one lid pull down in a slow, deliberate wink. The lid remained narrowed.

Casey knew then that Logan was going to fight for it. He weighed their chances and then forgot about that angle. He would be ready when Logan moved. He waited.

The stocky man had dialed a number and was talking in low, jerky tones.

"One of 'em's that picture-taker; the other acts like a cop…. Yeah…. Yeah. Because we couldn't get out. We didn't lock the door, and these muggs bust in with only one knock. We couldn't make the back door, so we ducked in the bedroom. Sure. But what do we do with 'em?"

He was silent for a moment after that: then he said: "Okey. Yeah."

Casey did not see the fellow hang up, because his eyes were still on Logan. But he heard the click of the receiver. And at that instant, Logan acted.

His movement was a peculiar, spinning maneuver that should have been awkward, but wasn't. The spin was catlike in its quickness, compact, and to the right.

As he moved his right fist swung down from the shoulder height, smashed on the thin man's gun wrist. The automatic spun from the fellow's grasp, skidded towards Casey. Then Logan completed the spin as his left came up and around in a looping hook.

Casey went into action as he heard the smack of fist on jawbone. One step brought him over the fallen automatic. As he stooped, a slanting, corner-of-the-eye picture presented the stocky man straightening from the telephone table, clawing at his pocket.

The automatic was cool in Casey's hot fingers. As he snatched it up he went to one knee and swung his arm over. He saw the sweep of the stocky man's gun, caught sight of the muzzle. Then the roar in his ears, the slap of recoil in his wrist told him the shot was his own.

The gun barrel that threatened him wavered, dipped. The automatic began to slide from limp fingers. Then Casey raised his

eyes. The man's mouth was open, quivering. There was a bluish hole over the one eye. He put one hand on the telephone table. The hand slipped off and he went over, crashing down with the table and the instrument under him.

Logan blew out his breath and let go of the unconscious gunman he had been holding for a shield. The fellow thudded down on his haunches, toppled over on his side. Logan pulled the telephone out from under the stocky man's body and slipped the receiver into place before he spoke.

"I coulda smacked this egg before," he said grimly. "Only I thought maybe we could learn something from the phone call."

Casey had straightened up. Logan stepped over, took the gun away from him. He turned it over in his hands thoughtfully, and looked at Casey's with eyes that were speculative.

"You're handy with that thing. How'd you learn to put 'em where you want 'em?"

"In France," said Casey absently. "I was a sergeant, and a .45 was the only gun I had. I did some practicing."

He went across to the davenport and sat down, his mind relieved of the necessity of action, returning once more to Wade. Then the thin man stirred on the floor. Casey watched him until he sat up. He stepped towards the fellow, jerked him to his feet and jammed him back against the wall.

"What'd you do with Wade?"

The thin man's eyes showed fear, but his lips tightened. Casey grunted, hauled off and threw a looping right that landed flat-handed against the side of the man's head and knocked him down.

Casey pulled the fellow up again. He repeated the question and when he got no answer, repeated the dose. The fellow began to curse in a whining, yet vicious voice. Logan said: "Lay off."

Casey knocked the man down again. The side of the face was beet-red now, but he was otherwise unmarked. "Where's Wade?" He shook the fellow. "What'd you do with him?"

This time the answer blurted in his face.

"They took him out. Buck'n me stuck around to search the place, to see if there was anything around that might—"

“Who took him out?”

The man seemed to flinch, but his teeth bared and clenched.

“Where’d they take him? Where is he now?”

“Go to hell! I won’t—”

Casey lost his temper then. The right came over again, but this time the hand was a fist and it landed on the side of the jaw. The fellow stiffened and he was still stiff when he hit the floor. Casey started after him again, then Logan yanked him back, spun him around.

“I told you to lay off.”

“We gotta find Wade,” rasped Casey.

“Yeah. Sure. But you mark that guy all up and I’ll get blamed for it, and we won’t get a chance to work him over. It takes more than a wallop to make some guys talk.”

“Well?” Casey’s eyes got bright and glaring and his voice was thick. “What do we do, sit here and wait for something to happen?”

“You get down to the *Globe* and camp on the picture. I’ll be down after it inside of ten minutes—just as soon as I can get somebody to take over here.”

He picked up the telephone, barked a number. Casey, scowling, hesitant, watched Logan until the lieutenant said: “Go on get the hell out of here.”

Casey’s eyes slid to the girl in the orange dress, with the stain on the back. Then he turned quickly and left the room.

It was not until Casey reached the *Globe* that he remembered his camera in the rumble seat of the roadster, remembered that he had it with him all the time, and that he had taken no pictures in Alma Henderson’s apartment.

Ordinarily this would have rankled; his pride in his work would have taunted him. To have a chance like that and get no pictures. This time he did not seem to care. And it was not entirely that the affair was to be kept quiet for a while. The answer, he told himself, was that he did not give a damn whether he got exclusive pictures or not. What the hell good did it do to break your neck for pictures for a lug like Fessendon? And Blaine. In a mind that was already harassed with thoughts of Wade, there was room for further doubt

and uncertainty. It wasn't like Blaine to let even the managing editor pull a stunt like breaking that plate.

To Casey, Blaine had always been the sort of fellow who would quit a job, rather than compromise with his duty or his scruples. And quitting would entail no hardship. He was the best desk man in the city—could get a job in any office.

Casey took the photograph from his desk, studied it. Then, cursing softly, he went down to the photo-engraving room, spoke to a sturdy looking man in blue jumpers and shirt sleeves.

"This is the only print Mac. I've gotta turn it over to the police, so make me a cut of it, will you, just in case this gets lost?"

Mac said sure, and Casey waited while the fellow set up the print and made his negative. As he returned the picture he said:

"What size you want it?"

"Same size, I guess."

"What'll I do with the cut?"

"Oh—" Casey hesitated, not caring particularly what was done with it. All he wanted was to have something to fall back on, some margin of safety in case something happened to the print. Blaine or no Blaine, he was going to hang on to it, until Handy and Nyberg were rounded up, until he found Wade. "Just pull a proof and keep it on hand for me," he finished.

5

Casey was slouched down behind his desk when Logan came in five minutes later. The lieutenant took the print, scanned it eagerly.

"It's gonna help," he said. "And it's about all we got, because I couldn't find anyone in that gambling take that remembered seeing anyone come out of that washroom."

"What're you gonna do?" Casey asked morosely.

"I've got that skinny guy outside. I'm takin' him down to work over."

"Well damn you, Logan, put on the pressure! He knows where Wade is—make him talk and hurry it up!"

“I’ll crack him,” Logan said resentfully. “Hang on till you hear from me.”

When the lieutenant left an office boy stuck his head in the doorway. “Hey, Flash. There’s a guy here wants to see you.”

“Tell him I’m busy,” grunted Casey.

The boy went out. But he came back a few minutes later, said: “That guy won’t go,” apologetically. “He says Wade told him to come and see you, that Wade owes him for the trip an—”

“Jeeze!” Casey’s eyes widened in sudden hope and amazement. “Get him up here!”

The taxi-driver, a beetle-browed husky, came in a moment later and immediately took the offensive.

“Somebody owes me some dough,” he barked. “I want it.”

“Maybe you’ll get it,” said Casey. “Where’s Wade?”

“I drove him to Pratt Street. He told me to wait, but he acted kinda nervous about something. He started in the house, then came back and said that if he didn’t come out in half an hour I was to come to you and tell you, that you’d pay.”

“Nervous, huh?” wheezed Casey. “Boy, am I glad I threw a little scare into him before he left.”

The driver blinked, said: “What?” and Casey snapped:

“Never mind—never mind.”

“Well,” the driver shrugged, “anyway, he came out about twenty minutes later—with a couple guys I’d seen go in before. But he didn’t come near my cab. They got in another bus. Well, it shaped up kinda screwy to me so I followed that other car. Then I came back here. I been waiting for—”

Casey blew out his breath and a tight smile pressed his lips against his teeth. “Where’d they go?”

The driver gave an address on Alson Street, and Casey said:

“Did you see ‘em go in the place?”

“No. I didn’t want to stop. But I saw ‘em get out of the car before I turned the next corner. Now how about my dough? It’s two-forty, waitin’ time and all.”

Casey took out a five-dollar bill, and as he passed it to the driver his brain focused on one thought. He knew where Wade had been

taken. He might have been moved since; he might not be there now. But it was a red hot lead.

The driver said: “I can’t change that.”

“Who said anything about change?” snapped Casey. Then, before the driver could do more than grin, the telephone rang. Casey answered it and a harsh baritone said:

“Casey?”

“Yeah.”

“You got a picture of that raid this afternoon. The kid buddy of yours says it hadn’t been developed when he left the office. Is it still that way?”

Casey was not long in making up his mind. Wade, knowing no one would believe him if he said the plate was smashed—that would be too much like a stall—had sold somebody on the idea that the plate had not been developed.

“Sure.” Casey hunched forward, then, seeing the taxi-driver edging towards the door, he motioned him to wait. “What about it?”

“I want it, that’s all.”

“Who’s talking?” Casey, grasping for some idea, tried to stall.

“Don’t give me that,” rasped the voice. “You got the plate. I want it. And if I get it, the kid’ll be okey.”

“What’s all the fuss about?” Casey made his voice bored, indulgent. “You can have the plate if that’s the way it is. We weren’t gonna use it anyway. I’ll bring it out myself if you say so.”

“You’ll do as I say if you know what’s good for the kid.”

“Sure,” said Casey.

“Then shut up and listen. You say the plate hasn’t been developed. Okey I’ll believe you because if you cross me, it’s your tough luck, not mine. I’ll have somebody pick up that plate. Don’t try to tip off the cops, don’t worry about havin’ this call traced because it’s a pay-station. If we get the plate and things are on the level, we’ll have it developed. If it’s the right one, the kid’ll be okey.

“We’ll hold him for a few days—to make sure you don’t shoot off your mouth about this—and let him go. But try anything screwy—give me the wrong plate—and do you know what’ll happen to this guy Wade?”

“I can guess,” said Casey bitterly.

“And with your experience you oughtta be pretty close.”

Casey glanced up at the taxi-driver and the germ of an idea caught in the recesses of his brain, expanded. He pulled a pad of paper across the desk, began to write hurriedly—a note to Potter, a leg man, telling him to take Casey’s roadster and go to the Alson Street address the taxi-driver had given him, and wait outside.

He could take no chances on that angle. That address had to be watched—until he could get in touch with Logan—and Potter could do that much anyway.

“What’s to prevent me from callin’ the cops and have ‘em here waiting for your hoods when they come for the plate?” he said into the phone as he wrote.

“Just this. If my plan is okey—and I don’t miss many—my men are outside your door waiting for you right now.

“I’m timin’ it close. You’ve got thirty seconds to go out, get them—without an argument—and let one of them speak to me. I’ll hold the phone for that thirty seconds. Don’t hang up, because if you do; if I don’t hear from my men; if they don’t come back—I know I’ve got to run for it, and I won’t be takin’ the kid. Now make up your mind, and step on it. I’m startin’ to count.”

Casey put the receiver on the desk and jumped to his feet. The sweat was creeping out on his forehead now, because he knew the man on the telephone was speaking the truth. The idea was thought out in detail. It was wild, but that voice made it convincing.

In the interval that he stepped towards the taxi-driver, he thought of many things. He had—Wade had—from now until a fake plate was developed. Blaine—Fessendon, damn them, had ruined forever any possibility of bargaining with the real plate.

Logan had the picture. It might convict Handy. But that would be damn’ small satisfaction to Wade. It was too late for Grady, the private dick; for Alma Henderson. But Wade—

Casey grabbed the driver’s arm, spoke in a hoarse whisper. “Take this note out to the city room. Find Potter. I don’t know where he is, but find him. Give him this note. Then go out and wait for me. I’m gonna need you.”

He gave the driver a shove, waited until he disappeared down the corridor; then he walked quickly along the same path, stepped into the noisy, light-flooded city room.

Two men stepped close to him. One was tall, foppishly dressed, handsome in a thin, swarthy way. He had a mustache and he smiled as he spoke, and showed large, even teeth.

"You got a phone call for us?"

Casey glanced at the other man, saw that he was a long-armed, puffy-eared fellow with a bullet head and no neck; then he said:

"Yeah. Step on it, will you?"

"After you," the swarthy man said.

Casey led the way. The men had apparently been warned to try no rough tactics. That alone showed how surely the layout had been planned. If they carried guns, they did not show them.

They hurried down the corridor to the deserted anteroom, and the idea in Casey's head, in full bloom now, put a grim smile on his lips, hope in his heart. Potter could go to Alson Street. Wade had been taken there from the Henderson woman's place; he was not necessarily there now. But if Potter covered that address, if he, Casey, could follow these hoods….

He grunted softly. He had pulled a stunt like that once, gone through a window to an adjoining two-story roof. And that taxi guy should be outside. He'd had some such half-baked idea when he told him to wait. The hoods would take the plate to the boss. If they went to Alson Street, he'd be sure; if not, he'd at least have two chances—and this time he could overlook neither.

The swarthy man said: "Watch him Russo," and bent down to lift the receiver.

"Hello. Yeah—this is Jaeger. Yeah, looks okey to me. Sure, I know what to do."

He hung up, smiled at Casey, and there was something hard, merciless in the smile.

"Let's have the plate."

Casey went to his platecase, took out a plate-holder which held one unexposed plate.

Jaeger took it, slipped it into his pocket. “Okey. I like the way you’re behavin’. See if you can keep it up.” He turned to Russo. “Get goin’. Out in the hall and see that she’s clear.”

Russo went out, and Jaeger said, “I’ll lock the door from the outside. Don’t make too much noise—too soon.” He stepped to the telephone and a vicious yank ripped the cord from the box at the baseboard. He did the same with the instrument across the room. Then he took the key from the door and went out.

Casey waited until the key clicked in the lock. Then he yanked open the drawer of his desk. Reaching far back, he drew out his .38 automatic, slipped it into his pocket. Then he crossed the anteroom to a green-shaded window and threw it open.

He’d hoped they’d forget the telephones. Then he could have called Logan, tipped him off. Well, Logan could get in on it later. Right now, and for the first time, he had something he could sink his teeth into, something tangible to work on. He had played his hand the only way he knew how, and the time left him depended on how soon that plate was developed. He did not think any more about Wade, because nothing but action could save him now, and Casey knew it.

He went through the window, and the staggered line of the downtown city looked as if it had been cut out of stiff black cloth and hung there against the muddy blue of the sullen sky.

Casey clung to the window sill a moment with his fingertips, to steady himself, let go. He hit the gravel roof one story below, hit on his heels and went over backward. The fall shook him, but that was all, and he rolled to his knees, ran towards the fire-escape at the rear of the building.

Less than a minute later he was back on the street, huddled in the darkened doorway of a music shop, watching the *Globe* entrance. Jaeger came out first with Russo at his heels. They crossed the street to a small sedan.

Casey sidled down along the building front. He had already located his taxi. And as soon as the sedan pulled out from the curb,

he was on the running-board, pounding the dozing driver, who shook himself, scowled at Casey, said:

"What the hell's the—"

"Follow that sedan," barked Casey, swinging open the rear door.

"Oh," growled the driver. "It's you, huh?" He stepped on the starter, craned his neck to get a look at the sedan as he shifted into low. "What's all this screwy followin' about?"

"About five bucks for you." Then, crisply, "Find Potter?"

The cab roared into the street and the driver said: "Yeah," and cramped the wheel for a U turn. The clock above Park Street said 11:55. There was enough traffic to screen them, but not enough to confuse their quarry with any other car.

The sedan had turned right at Boylston; the lights changed as the cab approached them, but they got a green arrow and made the turn. The theater front on the left was dark; beyond the high spiked fence on the right, the Common looked even darker. Casey leaned forward, knocked on the glass and the driver slid back the partition.

"Not too close, but if they give you the slip—"

"Give who the slip?" The driver snorted contemptuously. "Don't be crazy."

Casey grunted, took the gun out of his pocket and inspected the clip. He slipped off the safety, fondled the cold bulk of the automatic, let it rest gently in his palm. When he looked out the window again the railroad yards were slipping by on the left, and the sedan was a block and a half ahead.

They crossed the avenue, and Casey's brain fought with questions and answers. When he looked up again it was because the cab had started to slow. He saw then that the sedan was slanting in towards the curb, still a block and a half ahead. Then he saw his roadster—at least he thought it was a roadster. Yeah. They were on Alson Street.

The cab slowed still more and Casey said: "Keep going, you mugg. Right on by 'em! Don't slow down!"

He slouched on the seat as soon as he saw the two men leave the sedan and cross the sidewalk. When the cab passed the apartment house he called to the driver.

“Take another street, turn right, go around the block.” He slid up on the seat, got out at the corner beyond the sedan a minute or so later. He gave the driver the promised five dollars, added: “I’ll remember you. You got what it takes.”

Casey spun about before the driver could thank him. As he turned into Alson Street he moved warily, and his eyes sought the shadowed niches and areaways.

Alson Street was not much different from Pratt Street. It was a little wider, and on one side, the opposite side from Casey and the parked sedan, there were some remodeled brownstone fronts. The apartments on the near side of the street were a little taller, a little more flossy and pretentious than that of Alma Henderson’s; but the reputations were about the same.

The roadster was parked nearly to the next corner, but Potter stepped from the shadows directly across the street from the sedan. Casey crossed to him and pulled him back into the areaway which had concealed him.

Potter said: “What’s up?” He was a stringy, long-necked fellow who wore glasses and a perpetually tired look. “I parked the roadster down the street a ways, because I wasn’t sure just what you wanted me here for.”

“It’s just as well,” said Casey and took out the automatic.

“Hey!” wheezed Potter.

“Wade’s in that apartment,” Casey muttered, and went on with a brief story of what had happened. “I got you to help because I wanted to check on this address, and because no matter what happens, there’s gonna be a sweet story for some guy.”

“But why don’t you get Logan—”

“That’s your job,” clipped Casey. “For all I know they might try to develop that plate inside—might be developing it now. So find a phone. There’s a drug-store two blocks down. Tell Logan the set-up. He oughtta get out here pretty damn’ fast.”

“But what—” stammered Potter. “You ain’t goin’ up there and try to shoot it out with those hoods alone?”

“I hope not,” Casey said grimly. “I’m gonna try and stall, throw a bluff—till Logan gets here. He’ll know how to handle it; only if the

shooting starts, I'm not gonna be empty handed."

Casey had left the *Globe* without his topcoat. Now he took the .38, reached around and stuck it down inside his pants, right in the small of his back. The pressure of his belt held the gun securely; the coat, draped from the shoulders, showed no suspicious bulge. He started across the street.

6

The foyer of the apartment house was U shaped and the single, self-operated elevator door was directly opposite the entrance. Casey stopped in front of it, realizing that he did not know where Jaeger and Russo had gone.

He muttered, "No one's been in or out of here since they came. They mustta left the elevator where they got off," and started up the stairs.

There was no elevator at the second floor; none at the third. He found it waiting on the fourth. He thought: "It's after twelve. I'll try every place with a light in it."

Eight doors opened from the wide, deserted hall. Casey started at the front, dropping to his knees at each door and peering at the bottom crack. The first three were dark. At the fourth— the second door on the right—a hairline of yellow met his gaze.

Casey put his ear close to the keyhole. A subdued murmur of voices reached him, unexcited. He straightened a little, drew a long, silent breath, glanced, unconsciously, back over his shoulder, then bent to the keyhole again.

He felt that he could wait a few minutes, give Logan that much time. Not too long, for if the plate could not be developed here, they wouldn't waste much time in taking it where it could be, and Casey had to stall them here if he was to count on Logan's help. The slow minutes dragged. Casey tried to estimate their number; tried once to reach his watch, but gave it up in preference to keeping his ear glued to the keyhole. Finally he straightened, took a deep breath and knocked.

After a moment a voice said: “Who is it?”

Casey grunted and his lips pressed into a weird, tight smile. The palms of his hands were damp, but he wiped them on the sides of his coat.

He said: “Santy Claus.”

The knob turned slowly, but the door opened in a jerk that flung it wide. Jaeger and Russo stood to one side, their automatics leveled at Casey’s stomach. Beyond, Moe Nyberg stood behind Wade, held him by the coat collar and pressed a gun in his back. Over by the windows stood Mike Handy.

Casey felt no fear now. No surprise. Rather a tense grim satisfaction gripped his brain. But after that first glimpse of the occupants of that room, he went into his act. Surprise flooded his face, choked his voice.

“Hey,” he wheezed. “What the hell?”

“Get in here!” clipped Jaeger.

Casey stepped across the threshold and Russo shut the door.

“How’d you get here?” jerked Nyberg.

“He followed us,” said Jaeger. “He must’ve—”

“Followed you?” croaked Casey, licking his lips. “No. Honest to gawd. I didn’t know—”

“It’s a plant!” growled Handy, starting forward. “Look in the hall.” He turned and looked out the windows at the street below.

Russo opened the door, peered out, said: “Naw. It’s clear.”

Handy said: “Clear outside too,” and relaxed.

Nyberg purred: “You’d better spill it, Flash. And you’d better make it good. How did you find us?”

Casey was stuck here, and he knew it. To tell the truth about either Wade’s taxi-driver, or his following the two gunmen would probably scare Handy into moving them out of the apartment—before Logan could get there.

So he let his imagination go, and made up his story as he went along. How logical it sounded did not particularly bother him; he wanted to make it interesting—and take plenty of time.

“A taxi guy told me,” he said nervously. “Wade said he took the Henderson woman downstairs after the raid, and a couple tough

looking muggs picked her up. Well, he was stuck on the girl; see? And he thought something might be up. But he couldn't run out on me, so he got a taxi-driver to follow this other car and find out where these two guys went.

"When the cabby came back to the office, Wade was out. He got worried about his pay so he looked me up. I took care of the fare and he gave me this address—just before you two came to the *Globe"* He nodded at Russo and Jaeger. "Maybe you saw him go out and—"

"Go on!" pressed Nyberg ominously.

"Well," Casey shrugged. "I wasn't sure of the set-up so I thought I'd do some checking."

"Oh," grunted Nyberg. He looked relieved and loosed his hold on Wade.

Casey, apparently still bewildered, glanced around. Jaeger brushed his mustache with an index finger and smiled again. Nyberg pushed Wade down on the divan. He was a sturdily built fellow, Nyberg. Bald, greasy-looking, with a heavy red nose and a thick-lipped mouth. His dress was slovenly, his fingernails dirty. Casey met his shrewd stare for a moment, then glanced at Handy.

Mike Handy looked worried. There was a film of moisture on his fatty face, and his eyes, which were black and seemed all iris, shifted nervously from the door to the windows beside him. The fingers of his other hand, which hung loosely at his side, moved spasmodically.

Wade said: "You were wrong about her, Flash."

Casey did not answer, or look at Wade. He gave no sign that he had heard, because he did not want to let on what he knew—not yet.

Then Handy said: "Let's get out of here. I don't like it. If we get caught in here—" He moved to a chair and picked up his black topcoat.

Nyberg nodded and stepped towards Wade. And Casey felt his nerves grow taut. They couldn't leave. Logan would never find them. He decided to tell what he knew—all of it. Gambling that his revelations would hold attention, postpone the present plan.

“How was I wrong about her?” he growled, and turned on Wade. “She got you to her place so these guys could take you, didn’t she? She put you on the spot and—”

“So—” breathed Nyberg, “this surprise business was an act? You know about that, huh?”

“Sure,” said Casey and made his voice confident, aggressive. “I oughtta. I was there when we trapped your other two hoods—in fact, I shot the stocky guy right over the eye. He’s in the morgue now.”

“She didn’t spot me,” Wade said, and Handy’s gasp was a background for his words.

Casey felt the sudden tenseness in the room, but he watched the young photographer. Wade was sitting on the divan with his elbows on his knees and his head down. His voice was listless; so was his attitude. He acted as though he did not care what happened, and Casey knew, in such condition, he could get little help from Wade in a showdown.

“She was on the level,” Wade went on. “You know why she chased me out of the office this afternoon? Because these guys—all but Handy—were in the next room. She was scared—for me, and for herself. She got me out and hoped to run for it.

“But these two guys”—he nodded at Jaeger and Russo— ”ran down the back way and picked her up. She told ‘em I didn’t know a thing. Then, when she called me at the *Globe”*—Wade hesitated, continued wearily— ”that was okey. Only—”

“To hell with all this crap,” barked Nyberg. “What else do you know, smart guy?”

“Plenty,” said Casey and grinned deliberately. “I know about Dopey Donlan, and the private dick, and the dope ring you were promoting at the tracks, and how you hooked that up with that track gambling outfit that got raided.”

“You spoke your piece, smart guy,” Nyberg said and his thick lips twisted in a mirthless smile, “and now you’re in it up to your neck. You’re gonna find out just how it feels.”

Handy put on his coat. “Let’s get out of here. There’s something screwy about this. I don’t like it.”

The sweat was on his forehead again and his lip trembled. “You, Russo, put the gun on the kid. Nyberg, Jaeger, watch Casey. Better search him first.” He waited while Jaeger patted Casey’s pockets, and Casey held his breath and stuck out his stomach, stuck it out and leaned so that his back arched slightly and the unbuttoned coat hung out and away from the gun.

“We’ll take ‘em out,” Handy went on. “If this plate is okey, I’m set.”

“You’re set?” sneered Nyberg. “How about me—the rest of us.”

“Well,” flared Handy. “I was in that raid this afternoon. Lucky they let me go after I paid the fine. If anybody’d seen me come out of that washroom—”

“Nerts!” said Nyberg. “I’m getting’ sick of your angles. Why all the panic? Why don’t we knock these guys off right here and now?”

“No—no,” said Handy, and his voice was shrill. “Take them out. I pay you plenty. I want a chance to get this plate developed, get an alibi.”

“You’re with us,” snapped Nyberg contemptuously, “and here’s once you stay with us. I’m beginnin’ to hate guys like you—all mouth and no guts.” He stepped to Wade, yanked him to his feet. “Come on, Kid.”

Casey waited there by the door. He was glad now that he had put on the bluff. It had worked longer than he expected. But was it long enough? He couldn’t tell. It was hard to judge time in this kind of a spot. And you could say things awfully quick. How much time had he killed? Five—six minutes. More, he hoped.

Russo had stepped over behind Wade. Handy opened the door and looked into the hall. Nyberg and Jaeger came alongside of Casey and he felt the guns in his side.

Casey made one more attempt to stall. “Say.” He let the fear come into his voice. “What’re you gonna do. You can’t—”

“Who can’t,” sneered Nyberg. “You know what we’re gonna do—so quit stallin’. You can take it, can’t you? Or is all these things I’ve heard about you just a lot of hot air.”

He dug his gun into Casey’s ribs, and they went out into the hall. Handy, and Wade and the bull-necked Russo; then Casey and

Nyberg and the grimly smiling Jaeger.

7

The elevator was still waiting in the hall. On the silent downward trip, Casey tried to map out some logical course of action. Logan had not arrived. Otherwise he would have been waiting in the hall.

The elevator door slid open and they started across the narrow, dimly lighted foyer. Casey felt the reassuring pressure of his gun in his back. He thought he could get to it. But there were three other guns—and there was Wade.

The kid did not know about Casey's gun. He would have no tip-off to a plan, even if Casey had one. And if the heat went on—

Handy paused after they went through the inner doors. There, in the imitation marble entry way, he said:

"It's too risky—six of us piling in that little sedan. Besides, we've used it twice today—we might get picked up. We'll just walk down the street easy-like. I've got a car in a garage around the corner."

He hesitated and the dim light from the foyer, sifting through the glass doors, made his fatty face jaundiced and shiny with moisture. He made one more plea.

"I'll make it a grand more apiece if you'll let me—"

This time it was Jaeger who voiced his contemptuous opinion. "I'll string with Nyberg. It'll be worth my grand to see you play ball."

Handy opened the outer door without answering. Nyberg said: "Keep your hands down and walk nice, guys."

Handy kept well in the lead, but the rest of them fanned out on the wide sidewalk. Casey cast a quick glance up and down the street and a blanket of dejection settled down upon him. His roadster was parked in the same spot, but the street was deserted. Logan had not —

Then he saw Potter.

At first there was but a blacker blotch in the shadows of that entryway across the street. Then the blotch took shape. It was Potter

all right, his stringy height identified him. He was on the sidewalk now, and he was starting across the street.

Casey sucked in his breath and held it. His glance slid sidewise. Wade was about an arm's length away, on his left, the curb side; beside, and slightly behind, walked Russo. Holding the same position—beside and a pace behind— Nyberg and Jaeger flanked Casey.

Casey had wanted to wait as long as he could in the hope that Logan might come. And if he did not come, that gun was the last resort.

He and Wade? Well, they were in it: they had to take a chance, accept the risk. But Potter, the crazy fool: it was no affair of his. And he was married and—

"Moe!" Jaeger's voice was soft, jerky. "There's a guy comin' across the street."

"Let him come," said Nyberg hoarsely. "If he horns in we might just as well shoot the works and—"

Then Potter, now halfway across the street, said: "Hey!"

It was absurd, that word. And Potter's act, although he may not have known it, was suicidal. Casey inwardly cursed it as such. Yet that soft call undoubtedly gave him a second to get set, because every man but himself glanced at Potter as he spoke.

Casey leaned to the left and made a vicious backhand swipe with the flat of his hand. He caught Wade alongside the face and the force of the blow knocked him off his feet, so that he fell over against Russo, carrying him to his knees. At the same instant, Casey's right hand reached for the gun in his back.

He forgot Wade as he spun about and his fingers found the butt of the automatic, but he was aware that somebody was fighting in the gutter. Then he had the gun free, up, and squeezed the trigger, twice, rapidly.

Nyberg's body jerked. Beside him and two feet away a flash of orange exploded and Casey felt something slice between his ribs and his left arm.

The slug, the flash of flame, came from Jaeger's gun. And as he fired, the fellow stepped behind Nyberg's sagging body, intent on

using it as a shield.

Casey's finger already tensed for a third shot when he saw what he faced. He had but little time to act, and he did as impulse commanded. He ducked his head and half dived forward so that his shoulder crashed into Nyberg's stomach.

They went down, all three of them. And Jaeger was underneath. He was cursing now and so was Casey, although he did not know it. For a moment or so the three men were a tangle of arms and legs, and as they scrambled there, Casey thought he heard the shrill scream of a siren.

Then Jaeger rolled clear, rolled clear and came to his knees. Casey's right hand was partly pinioned by the now limp weight of Nyberg's body. He yanked at the wrist, felt the gun come free. But his eyes had never left Jaeger, and he knew he was too late.

The fellow's teeth flashed in some reflected ray of the street light, and the gun leveled as Casey tried to swing up his hand in time. A hundredth part of a second maybe; no longer than that. But Casey looked down the muzzle of that gun and his muscles tensed for the shock.

Somebody said: "You!"

The crash of the gun wiped out the phrase, pounded at Casey's right ear, half deafened him. And he could not understand it because he had seen no flash from that gun muzzle.

A car roared past. Jaeger, still on his knees, began to tip over, half on his face, half on his side. When his shoulders hit the sidewalk Casey looked around. Potter was standing three feet away. His right hand was still stiffly extended— and there was a gun in it.

Casey blew out his pent-up breath and spun about on his knees. Handy was fifty yards away, racing madly for the corner, his coat-tails flying. A touring car swung into the curb beside him.

There was a shouted command, another. Handy raced on, swerving towards an entryway. The car kept pace. Then flame streaked through the night and two sharp cracks slapped down the street, reverberating from the brick walls. Handy took three more steps at breakneck speed. He stumbled; he slid forward on his face like Rabbit Maranville stealing home.

8

Captain Judson put his fists on his hips and said: “You get in the damnedest messes.”

“It took you long enough to get here,” Casey said grimly.

Logan was looking down at Nyberg. Wade sat on the curb. Potter still held the gun. He lifted his arm, stared at the automatic, dropped the arm again. He kept doing it, as though he could not believe he had used it. And all the time he was saying: “Jeeze—jeeze,” in thick, hushed tones.

There were two police cars in the street now, and overhead windows were up, and heads and shoulders in whitish nightclothes hung on the sills.

Logan said: “Looks like the only guy left is Russo.” He stared at the bullet-headed fellow who stood flanked by two plain-clothesmen. “How did we miss him?”

Casey had told what had taken place in the apartment, finished with: “Don’t ask me. I only knocked Wade into him. After that—”

“You damn’ near knocked me out,” Wade said. “I thought he was gonna let me have it. He could have easy enough. But I guess Potter —” he broke off.

Potter coughed, spoke apologetically. “They were both on the ground, but I saw this guy start to swing his gun around, so I kicked him in the head and took it away from him.” He hesitated, looked at Casey. “Then when I saw how you were fixed—well, I had to let him have it.”

“You had to do it, huh?” Casey said, and grinned wryly. “I guess it’s a break for me you felt that way about it.”

“I never shot anyone before,” Potter said. “I was afraid I’d miss. I got as close as I could.”

Logan said: “You newspaper guys do pretty well for amateurs.”

Casey looked down at Nyberg, cursed once, said: “I’m glad I got that anyway.”

An ambulance pulled into the curb. Then Casey realized that he was shivering, that he had no coat. And his side was smarting; he

thought his undershirt was wet. He told Logan about it and one of the internes started to take him into the apartment house foyer.

Casey turned to Wade. “Come on, snap into it. My camera’s down in my roadster. Get busy.”

Judson watched the interne strap up Casey’s side. The wound was superficial, grazing the ribs and cutting a shallow, two-inch furrow in the flesh.

Casey glanced up at Judson and let his voice get disgusted. “What a help you turned out to be.”

Judson scowled. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Was that picture I got this afternoon a break for you?”

“Sure it was a break. That tipped the business. We’d got Handy eventually—on that alone.”

“Yeah,” fumed Casey. “But if you’d had your way there wouldn’t been any picture. I just happened to hold out that print.” He snorted disdainfully. “Callin’ up the office and tellin’ ‘em we can’t print it.”

“Who called up?”

“You did.”

Judson’s eyes widened, then narrowed. His voice had a humorous undertone.

“Maybe a scratch on the ribs makes you slug-nutty or something. You talk that way. Hell”— he grunted, pulled at his nose— ”Whenever you steal a picture on me I don’t want printed I won’t call the office. I’ll take it away from you myself—like Haley did with your second one.”

Casey scowled for a moment; then his eyes got sultry and he said: “Oh,” softly.

Wade took six pictures. Casey had the three plate-holders in his pocket when they went into the *Gbbe* city room. Blaine was at the desk.

Casey who had been talking to Wade all the way in, pulled him to a stop before they crossed the room. “Listen, Kid. Shake it off. I know how you feel. And if it helps any, you were right, and I was wrong, like most wise guys are.

“She wasn’t a tramp—she just ran with tramps. She had two strikes on her, just working for a guy like Nyberg. That’s not your fault.”

“But if I could have helped her or—”

“Sure, I know.” Casey pulled Wade across the room. “We did the best we could. After all, she sorta put you on the spot by even callin’ you to her place. But she was level with you and she did what she could with what she had to do with.”

“I guess you’re right,” Wade said and seemed to shrug off some of his dejection. “Only I sorta liked her.”

Blaine leaned back in his chair and his eyes were cold and unsmiling.

Casey said: “Did Potter phone in the story?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I got a story you’re gonna hear and—”

“And I’ve got one for you,” snapped Blaine. “You’re fired!”

Casey’s jaw dropped, and Wade stiffened and froze there.

“Fired?” Casey swallowed, and amazement gave ground slowly before his anger.

He choked on a curse and had a hard time getting his words out. Not because he was fired. That had happened before. What threw him off stride was that Blaine had stolen his thunder, had taken the offensive right out of his hands.

“All right,” he clipped. “I’m fired. One of your ideas huh?”

“It was Fessendon’s idea,” said Blaine. He lifted some copy paper from a halftone cut. Beside the metal plate was a proof. The proof was of the picture Casey had given Logan. “I think this cut came up from the engraving room by mistake, but Fessendon saw the proof. You held out on him, huh?”

“And a damn’ good thing I did,” flung out Casey. He put both hands on the desk top and leaned on them. He held that position while he told Blaine the whole story about that picture, what it meant to the police, how it had been used to bargain with and the reason he had had a halftone made.

There was a peculiar gleam in Blaine’s eyes now. Casey saw it, but he could not fathom it. It was hard, intent, yet there seemed to

be something in the background. It couldn't be humor— a grim sort of humor—

Casey flung aside the thought, and with this mental effort some of his rage evaporated. That first hot burst at Blaine's announcement came from impulsive reaction; but as the true character of the situation, as the underlying significance of the city editor's attitude dawned upon him, a new kind of anger fastened itself upon him. Anger that was logical and mixed with weariness, disillusionment, resentment.

This feeling was strange to Casey, strange but not hard to understand. He had been going at top speed since four-thirty that afternoon. The past five hours had been crammed with action, and death, and a nerve-wracking tension that centered around the safety of Tom Wade.

Perhaps it was this strain that brought about that hollow feeling of discouragement; it might have been that he was tired, that his head ached, or that the wound in his side had left him weakened. More probably it was because Blaine had let him down. Blaine, the sharp-tongued, unsympathetic driver—who always backed up his men.

"All right," Casey said finally. "I'll be glad to go." His voice was husky, a bit scornful now, his smoldering anger and resentment tinging each word.

"I only stuck here because you had something on the ball, and because I always thought you were on the level. I had you figured for the one newspaperman in town who would print the news as he saw it and not let some fat-headed guy with a lot of money call you.

"But if Fessendon's got you, if you can't take it, if you're gonna do what he says and like it"— Casey breathed deeply, tightened his lips— "why, that's okey with me. I knew damn' well I had the right dope when you pulled that Judson gag. But I never thought you were a liar."

"Who's a liar? What about Judson?" said Blaine, and his voice got thin.

"Just like I said. He didn't call here and tell you or Fessendon to kill that picture. I asked him."

“He didn’t—” Blaine got up slowly, menacingly and leaned across the desk.

“It was that skirt-crazy Lee Fessendon that—”

Blaine spun about and started through the doorway behind his desk. Casey followed him, still talking. And Wade, goggle-eyed and with nothing else to do, tagged behind. Blaine moved to Fessendon’s office with stiff-kneed strides, threw open the door.

Fessendon looked up from his desk, started to smile. The smile faded when Blaine spoke.

“You said Judson told you we had to kill Casey’s picture.”

“He—he did,” said Fessendon, avoiding Blaine’s stare.

“Casey says Judson said no such thing.”

“Well,” Fessendon stood up and his pink face got red and scowling. “Are you going to take his word against mine?”

“Any time,” rapped Blaine, “and anywhere. I told you when I stayed on here I’d run this sheet my way or not at all. You framed up the Judson gag because neither you—nor your kid brother had guts enough to stand up and—”

“You can’t talk that way to me,” stormed Fessendon.

“You hear me, don’t you?”

Fessendon took a menacing step forward. “I’m running this paper. Suppose Lee did call me up and tell me about that picture? I don’t take orders from you, Blaine, and—”

“You said it.” Blaine’s lip curled. “Maybe you take them from that jelly-kneed brother who was afraid to face a bawling out from his wife.”

“You’re fired,” shouted Fessendon.

“That makes two of us,” said Blaine.

“Three,” piped up Wade.

“And I have one thing more to toss in the pot,” Blaine rapped. “Plenty of fellows think I’m a slave driver; I don’t doubt they hate my guts. But I’ve had one sort of a reputation. I played the game and I played it square. Casey’s the first man that ever said I wasn’t on the level: the first guy that ever called me a liar—and I can’t blame him.

“I hate a liar, too, Fessendon. I hate a double crosser. And that’s what you are, a lousy, lying, double-crossing—!”

Fessendon hit Blaine then. Hit him back of the ear and Blaine went down. Casey cursed and stepped forward, but Blaine sat up, said: “You stay out of this.”

He got to his feet and deliberately repeated his opinion. Fessendon, his face a livid mask, swung his right. This time Blaine was ready. He said: “I thought so,” as he moved inside that right and jabbed his left to Fessendon’s stomach.

Fessendon gasped and he seemed to gag as he crumpled. Then Blaine crossed his right. It landed flush and it straightened Fessendon before it dropped him.

Blaine backed away, turned at the door. Casey and Wade followed him out. Blaine went to his desk, opened the bottom drawer, took out a briefcase and systematically packed it with his personal belongings. He closed all the drawers, stepped over to the clothes-tree and got his hat and coat. As he stepped past the grinning Casey and the open-mouthed Wade, he turned, spoke irritably:

“Well, come on, you big ox. Don’t stand their gawking.”

In the hall Casey said: “Did Fessendon tell you to fire me?”

“Sure,” said Blaine, punching the elevator button. “If I hadn’t he would have.”

“But you knew I had some redhot plates of that—”

“I didn’t *know* you had ‘em,” said Blaine. But you generally pull something out of the hat, and I wanted to fire you before you showed them to me. Then you could take them down the street to the *Express* or *Mirror*—not that you need anything to bargain with.”

Blaine muttered a soft curse. “You got a dirty deal from Fessendon, but you ought to be glad you’re out. I was all washed up with him anyway, after he broke that plate—as if we were a bunch of blackmailers. But he just came in his office about ten minutes ago, and I was going to be nice about it and give him two weeks’ notice.”

Casey’s broad face was cracked in a wide grin that would not come off. He was no longer tired. It was good to be free of

Fessendon, to know that Blaine was level, that Wade was okey. He released a sigh of satisfaction and relief, said:

"Well, where we go in' now?"

"I'm gonna call up Gilman at the *Express* and see if he wants a city editor and a couple of cheap cameras. But first"—the elevator door opened and Blaine stepped in— "we'll stop at Steve's and have a couple to celebrate on."

Casey said: "You think of things."

Wade grunted sardonically, said: "The idea is okey so long as I don't get stuck with short beers."

One of the most interesting reading experiences a dyed-in-the-blood fan can have is to go back into the earlier work of a writer who is now a steady contributor to the bigtime magazines and compare that earlier work with the same writer's current opera. You will usually discover that the writer's earlier virtues persist — on a modified, or to use a more honest word, on a compromised basis. The newer stories are more fashionably dressed; with success, the hardier virtues survive, though obviously more streamlined, more sophisticated, and more slickly conscious of the old reliable formulas. The more delicate virtues generally take a beating: approach (what some editors call "slant"), technique, and style are dictated by the powers-that-be, the invisible arbiters who sit in the slick seats of the mighty.

Take, for example, this story written by George Harmon Coxe nearly twenty years ago. From a strictly realistic, as distinguished from the so-called hardboiled viewpoint, "Invited Witness" is one of the toughest tales Mr. Coxe has ever straitjacketed into less than 3000 words.

George doesn't write this kind of yarn any more . . .

INVITED WITNESS

by GEORGE HARMON COXE

SPEAK your piece, Charlie, and quit stallin'." Jack Wolfe leaned back in his chair and rolled a cigarette.

"I know what you want. I read that Sob Sister story in *The Record*. I'm a killer, eh? And you're being big-hearted — gonna give me a chance to tell my side of the story maybe."

Wolfe stuck the finished cigarette in one corner of his mouth, lighted it, and turned to face me.

For a moment or so I studied that thin, gray-eyed face with its pointed chin and almost lipless mouth. Then I could feel the flush that swept over my face. I dropped my eyes and picked at the brim of my dark hat.

I wasn't prepared for a direct attack. I had hoped to get around to the subject in a more diplomatic manner. Now he had me where I couldn't sidestep — not and get away with it.

"Something like that," I mumbled. "This Varelli was a family man and —"

"Yeah. He was. Had a wife and two kids. He drove a Packard and they were starving. All they got was a monthly beating. And Varelli had only killed two men. The last one was a bank messenger — was shot four times. Four times, Charlie, and the kid never had a gun. Think it

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over. I suppose it would have been better if I'd let Varelli make it three. But then I wouldn't be here to give you your story, would I, Charlie?"

Wolfe's voice was bantering but there was no smile on his face.

I didn't answer right away, couldn't think of anything to say. Jack Wolfe was Special Investigator for the District Attorney and he had the reputation of getting things done. He had all kinds of authority to back him up. He was practically independent as an operative, responsible only to the D. A. Yet he could call on the police if he needed help.

This Varelli had been a rat, a murderer — anyone could tell you that. And Wolfe had done a good job in knocking him off. But he had, nevertheless, the unsavory reputation of a killer. Most people left the "e" off his name — labeled him The Wolf, and public sentiment was against him.

And when this dame down at *The Record* had run wild on the Varelli story, the chief sent me down to see what I could get from Wolfe for *The Courier*. I looked up at him again. The half-smoked cigarette drooped from his mouth and there was a mocking twinkle in his eyes.

"Well," he grunted. "What about it?"

"Don't get me wrong," I replied. "I'm not saying you shouldn't 've plugged Varelli. All I know is that you're quicker'n hell on the draw. The witnesses who saw it said you both yanked out your guns at the same time, but that you fired an instant before he did."

Wolfe laughed. "I'm quick on the draw — but we both drew at the same time. Then I can't be so quick, eh?"

"Well —" I stammered. "I don't know. I wasn't there. That's what I heard."

Wolfe sat upright with a jerky movement, tossed the cigarette away and pulled his coat sleeve up. Rolling up his shirt sleeve above the elbow, he showed me his arm. A yellowish scar showed on one side of the muscle, a larger scar on the other side.

"There's one," he snapped. "I got another one in my side. I didn't get 'em in Europe either. I got 'em right here in Boston. And I got both of 'em because I drew first — and didn't shoot."

He rolled down his sleeve. "Quick on the draw! That's a lot of bunk. It's got nothin' to do with it. There's plenty of guys in the grave that drew first."

"Well, then," I pressed, "what's the answer?"

"The answer's a state of mind." He waited a moment for his words to sink in. "When you go after a man you've got to know whether he's gonna shoot or not. And if he is going to shoot, you've got to be first — if you want to live.

"I've seen a cop with his gun drawn stop a guy who still had his rod in his pocket. Yet the cop was the one that got plugged. Why? Because he didn't think the other guy would shoot —

while the guy himself knew he would.

"After this second nick I got, I made up my mind I wanted to live a while. Understand, I don't draw unless I have to. But when I draw on a killer now, I figure on shootin'.

"This Varelli thug is an example. He was a killer. I knew it, everybody knew it. I went in after him. Neither of us had a gun in our hand. When he went for his, I knew he meant business."

Wolfe pulled out the makings and started another cigarette.

"Doesn't make a very good story, does it, Charlie?"

"Well —" I hedged. "I guess it does, but I never thought of it that way before."

"Then let it lay. I'll give you a ring in a couple days — if I'm lucky. If you want, I'll let you see for yourself."

Wolfe kept his word and three days later I got the call. It was in the evening and I was down at his office about nine o'clock.

He was sitting indolently in his chair, one of his half-consumed, smoke-stained cigarettes in the corner of his mouth. It was a funny habit, that rolling his own. It must've been a hangover from his army days. I never saw him smoke anything else.

I waited for him to speak. I didn't know just what he was going to do or what he had in mind. He'd said he was going to let me see for myself. And without knowing how or why, there was a definite tingle to my skin and the palms of my hands were damp.

"All set, Charlie?" he said, finally.

"Sure. What're we gonna do?"

"We're goin' after Shulz."

I whistled and made no attempt to disguise my feelings. Shulz was the one they had been looking for on the baby killings. The fellow had a record a mile long but with surprisingly few convictions. He'd been up for murder twice and both times he had beaten the rap. And two weeks ago, in gunning out a rival, he had killed a little girl and crippled a boy.

I hadn't said anything to the chief about Wolfe's offer, but now I thought I'd better phone in. To tell the truth, I wasn't so sure I was coming back.

"Is it all right to call in and tell 'em what I'm on?" I asked. "I'd like to have 'em get all the stuff out of the files and the morgue, so they'll be ready for it. Will it break by eleven?"

Wolfe looked at me with that poker face of his and his lips barely moved as he spoke.

"It'll break by eleven. But I don't think you'd better call in. You may change your mind about it before you get through. And — we might not be successful."

I knew what he meant by that last, so I sat back and watched him open the drawer of his desk and take out a long-barreled, light automatic. I was plenty surprised and I guess I showed it when I spoke.

"You're not going after Shulz with that, are you? Looks like a .22."

"It is." Wolfe fondled the gun, slipped out the clip. "And this isn't always what I use, Charlie."

He put the clip back in the .22, pulled back the slide to throw a bullet in the chamber, and laid it on the desk. Then taking a larger gun — a revolver — from the drawer, he inspected this also.

"This is the old stand-by. A .38 special. But sometimes I have use for the .22. It all depends on the job and what I've got to do."

He slipped this in his shoulder holster and picked up the .22 again.

"It's a funny thing, Charlie. They've got me down for a killer. A hardboiled murderer. Well, I've been on this job five years and I've killed just three men in that time — including Varelli. Not so many, is it, when you think of what I've been up against."

"But," I sputtered. "It seems like —"

"Nope." Wolfe interrupted and forestalled the thought I was about to express. "I've shot plenty, Charlie. That's what you're thinking of. I've shot plenty — wounded 'em enough so we could take 'em. But that doesn't make such a good story, does it?"

I kept still and he continued. "That's what the .22 is for. With the .38 I can generally put a quick shot in a three-inch circle at ordinary range. With the .22 I can make that a one-inch circle. It's almost as good as a rifle, Charlie. And sometimes it comes in handy."

Wolfe stood up and slipped the .22 in his coat pocket. "I guess we're set. And just remember, this is no picnic. You know Shulz's reputation. If he should get me, it might be sort of tough on you. I'll try to take care of you, but it's not too late to back out and I wouldn't blame you if you did."

I looked at the sharp-featured face, sized up the slim, wiry build. There was competence in every line of him.

"It's O.K. with me," I said.

We left the taxi at Columbus Avenue. "How do you know you'll find him?" I asked.

"I'll find him. That's what stoolies are for. He won't be in when we get there but we'll stick around till he comes.

"The house is almost down to the next block. I'll go down alone. You watch me. See where I go. Then follow me in about five minutes. I'll wait down in the hall for you."

Five minutes later I followed Wolfe down the depressing canyon of three and four storied, dirty brick apartment houses. There was a sordid atmosphere of decay about the neighborhood that quickened my footsteps. I was glad when I reached the house into which Wolfe had turned.

The door was unlocked and Wolfe was waiting inside.

I followed him up two flights of narrow, dimly lighted stairs and down a corridor to an entrance on the left. He tried the knob, then fished out a ring of keys. An instant later he

pushed open the door and stepped inside. I followed and stood out of the way until he had closed the door again.

The place seemed pitch black. And as I waited there in the darkness for him to speak, I was conscious that I was holding my breath, that the blood was thumping at my eardrums. It seemed as though we stood there for five minutes before he said:

"Just stand there a minute."

He snapped on a flashlight. A handkerchief was over the lens and the diffused light which came from the bulb cast an eerie glow over the room. I could see that it was garishly furnished, could make out a davenport, a table, some chairs.

Then the light went out. I could hear Wolfe fumbling with something in the room, heard him grunt.

"It won't be long now," he said. "I guess the best place for you to stand is right in that doorway. If things don't work out, you can beat it back there to the kitchen. Now we'd better keep still."

He snapped on the light again until I took up my station in the hall doorway, then he switched it off again. But I wanted to ask one more question and I did.

"How come you're after this guy alone? You know he's goin' to be here. Why not let the cops in on it?"

"Yeah. That's just it. If they knew about it, there'd be fifty cops around this place. They'd be so thick Shulz couldn't miss. This way is safer. Now shut up."

I don't know how much later it was, probably not more than ten minutes, when I heard the footsteps in the outside corridor. And if I was nervous before, I was tensed all over now. Maybe I was scared; I know I wasn't happy about it. I wished then that I'd found out if there was a back door.

Then a key clicked in the lock and I tried to put my thoughts together. Would Wolfe shoot Shulz down in the doorway? Would he give him a chance?

I watched the door swing slowly open. A narrow strip of yellow from the lighted hall crept across the floor, picked out the pattern in the rug, played tricks with the table and chair in its path. I glanced quickly toward the wall opposite the door to see if Wolfe could be seen. I couldn't pick him out.

Then I watched the tall, thick-set figure, silhouetted in the doorway; saw him step into the room and raise one hand along the wall.

A switch clicked. Nothing happened. I stiffened as the fellow by the door spat out a curse. That was what Wolfe had been fumbling with. He had unscrewed the light bulbs.

Then a conical beam of light shot out from a point directly opposite the door. Wolfe's flashlight. I couldn't see what was behind it. I shrank back in my doorway and looked at Shulz.

For a second or two he stood there as though transfixed. His fleshy, heavily jowled face looked ghastly white in the artificial light. His eyes seemed

to recede under the puffy lids and a tongue licked out to wet his lips.

"Stick 'em up, Shulz!" Wolfe barked the command. Then it happened.

This was what I had come to see and here it was. My eyes were glued on that puffy face of Shulz. I saw it coming, that thing Wolfe had spoken about, that action of the brain that meant death.

His hand darted inside his coat and I knew what to expect when the gun came out. I wanted to yell at Wolfe, wanted him to shoot while he had time.

Shulz's automatic whipped into view and the instant it was free of his clothing a streak of flame stabbed the darkness and a roar shattered the quiet of the room.

The time between the first shot and the second couldn't have been more than a watch tick. But it was long enough for a weakness of fear to sweep over me with the realization that Wolfe must have been hit. But the conical sweep of the flashlight still held steady.

Then the second shot roared and by that time I couldn't have run if I'd wanted to. Then two jets of flame shot out from a spot about four feet from the flashlight. Two sharp, distinct cracks sounded, like a person slapping a mosquito on his hand.

Shulz's face twitched. His mouth dropped open and the automatic slid from a hand that showed red on the back. One knee sagged and he braced himself on the other leg to keep from falling.

Wolfe, the .22 in his right fist, stepped into the flashlight's rays, reached up and turned one of the light bulbs. The resulting glow showed the flashlight resting on the back of an overstuffed chair. Wolfe moved over to Shulz, who hadn't said a word, and picked up the fallen automatic.

Backing toward a wall phone he said, "Now you see where the .22 comes in, Charlie. The one in the forearm crippled his gun hand, the one in the knee makes him stick around. I didn't have to kill this guy because, for once, we got a case he can't beat."

He reached up for the receiver. "Of course, this may not give you the story you want. This wasn't a regular shooting contest. I tricked him with the flash, turned it on and stepped to one side. Maybe that don't count. But maybe you can see what would've happened to some conscientious cop standing there with a flashlight — maybe you can see how a real killer works.

"And if this ain't just what you want, Charlie, let it lay. There may be a time when I can take you out with a .38 instead of the .22."

It only took a little lead and blood mixed with the ice and snow on that hill to turn Detective Flagg's coast into a

Slay Ride

By G. H. Coxe

TOM FLAGG stepped out of the cigar store on the corner of Tremont and Avery Street and tore open his pack of cigarettes. He lighted one, buttoned his topcoat and stood for a moment, watching the waves of humanity that passed in review.

There were nearly a dozen threatres and movie palaces within a few blocks of where he stood, and something in the very faces of these people who passed him spoke of relaxation, proclaimed that the cares of the day, the serious struggle for existence had been cast aside for these few eagerly awaited hours.

The spirit of the passersby caught Flagg in its grip. His lean, irregularly featured face twisted in a grin. With long, loose-jointed strides, he swung easily down the street and became one of the crowd.

Then the spell snapped with sudden, nerve-tingling finality. A woman's scream, full-throated, terror-stricken, echoed in the street. The crowd checked its course uncertainly.

Flagg slipped through to the curb and raced down the pavement toward the corner of Boylston. Of the scream, he knew no more than the crowd. But instinct, born of long training, had made action synonymous with thought. That cry had come from the vicinity of the Colony Theatre.

"Drop it!" The words froze Flagg to the spot.

He had covered not more than thirty feet when he heard the shot. There was a shout, other half-stifled women's cries. As he ran he saw the signal light on the corner was on orange. Traffic was at a standstill while pedestrians scurried across, or paused in their scurrying to gawk.

The cop in the signal booth jumped to the pavement and struggled with his revolver. There was a grinding of gears, the bark of an open exhaust. Pedestrians scattered wildly. A taxi roared into view and Flagg's hand darted under his left arm.

The picture of the grim-faced driver, the two men in the rear seat, etched itself in his brain. He knew what was coming, was powerless to stop it. One man leaned from the cab, a gun in each hand. The taxi swerved sharply, directly at the cop. There was a sickening thud as the fender clipped the officer, knocked him sprawling. The fellow with the guns leaned farther out as the cab raced on, and fired four shots at the prostrate policeman.

Flagg slid to a stop with his gun up. The man in the rear seat saw him. The ratlike face grinned evilly, the automatic whipped down.

The two fired at the same instant. Something twitched at the sleeve of Flagg's coat as he felt the slap of recoil from his thirty-eight, saw the glass above the man's head dissolve and shower down.

He cursed bitterly as he realized he had missed; cursed the huddled pedestrians on the sidewalk who screened the speeding cab and made another shot impossible.

Slipping the gun in its holster, he spun about and leaped toward the body of the policeman. He dropped to one knee, turned the man on his back. A mounting dread filled him as he saw the blood-streaked head, the stained uniform. He felt fearfully for the pulse. It was still.

FOR a full minute Flagg knelt there beside the slain policeman, silent, motionless, while the crowd pressed in on him. Until a year ago, when he had set himself up as, what he called, a Special Agent, he had been a member of the Boston police force. And like every man on the force he had the genuine hate of a cop-killer.

The dead officer in front of him had been deliberately murdered. The slug-ridden body had been torn from life as it lay helpless and unconscious on the pavement.

The raucous clanging of an ambulance gong brought Flagg to his feet. There was a bitterness in his blue eyes that gave them the quality of cold steel. The crowd fell back a step from the grim-faced man whose mouth was like a whip scar.

As two internes with a stretcher burrowed their way to the body, a stocky, red-faced man with a shapeless felt hat and worn overcoat pushed in behind them and grabbed Flagg by the arm. Sergeant Brady's deep-set, gray eyes flashed a warning, and for a moment the two men stared at each other silently.

"Speak your piece, Flagg," snapped Brady.

And Flagg told what he knew. He confessed to missing the murderer, showed the torn fabric of his coat sleeve.

"But I don't know yet," he finished, "what it was all about."

"You don't, eh?" Brady's eyes narrowed.

Flagg liked the stocky sergeant. They were rivals now, but they shared a strange friendship founded on mutual respect. They understood each other.

"You don't, eh?" Brady repeated softly. "Well, I'll tell you. That bunch stuck up Marie DeRocca near the Colony Theatre. They got that ninety-thousand-dollar necklace of hers."

"So—" Flagg's lips pursed and he whistled softly. The cold look in his eyes remained, but he cocked one eyebrow and

said: "Well, it looks like you play this one alone, Brady. But if you need me, you know where to look."

He wheeled about and started down the street.

Marie DeRocca's necklace. Flagg knew about it. Publicity had seen to that. If they hadn't played it up in the papers, it wouldn't have been stolen—and that cop would be alive. But he realized the vanity and sentiment of the singer.

Fresh from Europe, she had made her debut in Boston five years ago—had bought the first pearl of that now matchless string in honor of her triumph. She had bought the last pearl three days before and had the necklace made, for sentimental reasons, here in Boston.

Flagg moved slowly toward the theatre. For once he regretted that he wasn't still on the force. He wanted to do something to pay off for that policeman. Now he had no business in the matter, unless—

On impulse he stepped into the crowded lobby, took out one of his business cards and scribbled a brief message on the back. A quick question of the doorman told him the operetta was to go on. He slipped a dollar to an usher.

"See that Madam DeRocca gets this—it's about the necklace."

FIFTY—fifty-one—fifty-two— Flagg sat across the table in Marie DeRocca's suite at the Hotel Barklay two days later, and watched Louis Kresser, her manager, count one-hundred-dollar bills. As the voice droned on with the count, he studied the man.

He was a short fellow with a big head, dead-white jowls and a fatty face. The hands were effeminate, perfectly manicured. Flagg disliked his foppish clothes.

"Ninety-nine—one hundred." Kresser finished and looked up. "There's the ten thousand."

"O. K.," said Flagg. "Now tell me about the pearls."

Kresser went into detail about the string and the clasp. "And," he finished, "there is a sure way to tell. The third pearl from the left of the clasp has a flaw, an off-color streak. You can be sure if you see that—I don't believe it can be duplicated."

He picked up the phone at his elbow. "Send up Mr. Burks."

"Burks, of The Star?" grunted Flagg. "Where does he fit?"

Kresser shrugged and spread his hands, palms up. "He has been following me up. I told him he could have the story first and I want to explain to him just how you are to act."

Flagg's mouth dipped at the corners. "I get it," he growled. "Checkin' up on me, huh?" He grunted disdainfully. "I don't usually solicit business, Kresser. I sent up my card that night on a chance, a chance that something might come up that wouldn't fit with the police. You see—I saw that cop murdered."

"I know." Kresser smiled. "I investigated your record before I called you. But don't forget—our business must have publicity."

"Skip" Burks barged into the room a moment later. He was a blond, green-eyed fellow, with a breezy manner and plenty of crust.

"Hi, Flagg," he greeted.

"Now here is the story," said the manager. "This pearl necklace is worth ninety thousand dollars." Burks grinned at this.

"But the value comes in the matching. The string could not be sold as a unit—too risky. If the pearls are sold separately, they would bring hardly twenty-five thousand to a receiver. That would mean the thieves could scarcely get ten. That was why I advertised ten thousand reward and no questions asked.

"Madame DeRocca is hard pressed to raise that amount—but it is better so than to lose the necklace. I got a reply to my ad this morning." He paused to give the letter to Burks. "Naturally, I could not call the police. They want the thieves—we want the necklace. That is why I called you." He bowed toward Flagg.

"The instructions are simple. These men will pick you up at the corner of Boylston and Fairfield Streets at eight o'clock. You will carry the cash and they will take you to the man who has the necklace. You will get it, after making sure of its authenticity." He looked at Burks and said: "I have described the necklace to Mr. Flagg.

"For this work, we will pay you five hundred dollars."

"And suppose," said Flagg meaningly, "I get the necklace without paying the ten grand. Will you split that with me?"

"But"— Kresser threw up his hands and his voice was excited—"you must take no chances. We want the necklace."

"I know that," rapped Flagg. "But suppose they fall in my lap"—he grinned at Burks—"or something?"

"Then we will give you half the ten thousand," agreed Kresser. "But Mr. Burks is witness to my orders to you. Get the necklace."

"Yeah," drawled Flagg. "And Mr. Burks is witness to a split of the ten grand if I bring back both." He watched Kresser slip the hundred-dollar bills into a heavy envelope and seal it.

"I'll be seeing you around nine o'clock," he said. He picked up his hat, nodded and left the room.

AS soon as he stepped into the hall, he heard another door open. He turned quickly, saw the tall, black-haired woman with her hand on the knob of a door which he placed as the bedroom of the suite. She held a fur-trimmed négligé closely about her statuesque figure. Flagg took off his hat and his eyes fastened on the oval face. He had never seen Marie DeRocca at close range, and he was struck by her genuine beauty.

"You will get my necklace?" The voice was quiet, yet held a throb that seemed to vibrate along his spine.

"Yes, madam."

"Please, do not fail. It was in Boston that I—" She broke off suddenly as emotion gripped her and Flagg said: "I understand."

And he did understand. Pearls were funny. Lots of women didn't like them—they were not flashy, spectacular. One had to have a real love and appreciation of their qualities to feel about them as this woman felt.

"I know you'll get them," she said, and smiled at him. "I'll wait for you at the theatre."

Downstairs in the lobby of the hotel, Flagg went immediately to the bank of phone booths at the rear of the desk. He called Ballard & Co., the jewelers who had fashioned the necklace, to see if there were any other peculiarities in the string that would make identification easier. He was disappointed when he got no answer, then he realized it was after six o'clock. He hung up, looked up another number, and talked for two or three minutes.

When he came back into the lobby, he ran smack into Brady. He could see the scowl on the sergeant's face, almost read the thoughts in his brain.

"Say, Brady," he stalled off the attack, "this officer McCarthy that was killed—has he got a family?"

"Yeah," grunted Brady. "Three kids."

"Any of 'em old enough to help out with expenses?"

"No." Brady grew thoughtful. "I'm afraid it's gonna be pretty tough on 'em." He hesitated, then seemed to remember his original intentions.

"But what the hell're you hangin' around here for?" he rapped.

"I got business here," Flagg grinned.

"Yeah. Monkey business, maybe."

"Maybe."

"And maybe you better watch your step."

"My pal, eh?" snorted Flagg. He wondered how much he could tell Brady.

"I'll let you in on something," he said at last, "that I wouldn't spill to any other cop in town. I'm carrying ten grand—for the necklace."

Brady's eyes widened and he spat out an oath. "I saw that ad in the papers. So DeRocca's comin' across, eh? That guy Kresser swore up and down he hadn't heard from it."

"Well, why not. They want the necklace. You guys keep crowding in on him, scare him to death. You want a pinch—he wants the necklace."

"You talk like a rat." The sergeant's lips curled. "You're the go-between for guys that murdered McCarthy—and you used to be a cop. I got a good notion—"

Flagg checked the angry reply on his lips, kept his temper.

"Be yourself!" he snapped. "I got a job to do—I'm gonna get those pearls. To get 'em I have to go to the guys that got McCarthy, don't I? If I get that far, I'll be a damn sight farther along than you are. I've always given you a break, haven't I?"

"Yeah, but—"

"Then get wise to yourself. Stick close to the phone between eight and nine tonight. I've got a hunch I'm going to run smack into some action. But get this—" Flagg's voice rasped and he thrust his chin forward—"if you put some flattie tailing me—if you gum the works—I'll make a chump out of you before morning."

Brady made noises in his throat as Flagg turned abruptly and left.

AT seven-thirty Flagg was in his apartment getting ready for the evening. As he had told Brady, he intended to get the necklace. It was his job, the job for which he was hired, and he wanted to make good.

Someone had to pay off for Officer McCarthy; someone had to think of his family. If he got the necklace and saved the ten thousand, half of it was his. He needed the money—but not as badly as did Mrs. McCarthy. Five hundred, his own fee, from five grand, left forty-five hundred.

"She ought to get by for quite a while on that," he said, putting his thoughts into half-whispered words.

He took off his coat and got a flat, compact, thirty-two automatic and a length of silken cord from his desk. He cocked one eyebrow at the gun and balanced it lovingly in his palm. Then he tied the cord skillfully around the barrel and butt so that when he let it dangle, it hung with the butt down.

He fashioned a noose, made sure it would hold. This he slipped over his head and twisted it around so that the gun hung flat against the small of his back, just above the hips. He shoved the cord up under his collar, slipped on his coat and walked across the room.

The gun patted against his back, but he knew this movement would be unnoticeable through his overcoat. And he knew the strength of the cord. It was sufficient for an ordinary pull; it would give to a sharp jerk on the gun.

"That ought to do," he said softly, as he put on his overcoat and slipped his thirty-eight in the pocket.

DOWNSTAIRS, outside the apartment-house entrance, Flagg stopped at the sidewalk. Snow had been falling steadily since three in the afternoon and was just beginning to let up.

He hunched his overcoat around his ears to keep the snowflakes from his neck and plodded down the street. The thieves were cagey. Instead of staging this meeting late at night when the streets would be deserted and following them a simple matter, they had picked eight o'clock—and a dead-end street. There would be only two corners to watch, and sufficient traffic to screen their movements.

An electrically lighted advertising clock down on Massachusetts Avenue pointed to five minutes of eight when Flagg reached the corner of Boylston and Fairfield. He stamped the snow from his shoes, lighted a cigarette and his alert eyes were never still.

When he saw the sedan bear down on him he felt of the envelope in his inside pocket, dropped his right hand to the automatic and slipped off the catch.

A rough voice said: "Got the dough?"

"Yeah," said Flagg.

"Get in!"

He glanced at the driver, stopped with his foot on the running board as he ducked his head and looked in on the back seat. Two men, one in each corner, watched him in the reflected rays of the street lights. Their faces were obscure, but he saw one was tall, slender; the other, a heavy-set man, held an automatic.

"Take your hand out of that pocket," lipped the man, "or—"

"Or what?" Flagg's voice purred menacingly. "I've got ten grand in my pocket, and if you think I'm going to let you birds roll me for it, you're crazy. Quit waving that gun around if you want my hand out of my pocket."

He could see the man start to lower the gun and look at his companion. "What the hell," he growled. "We're not gonna tip you off to where we're goin'—we've gotta blindfold you to—"

"That's what you think." Flagg's mouth twisted in a disdainful grimace. "But I'm going to ride where I can watch you." He got in the sedan and pulled out one of the small seats. "You can pull down all the shades—I'll sit facing you."

With his hand still in his pocket, he sat down, facing the rear. The two men pulled down the curtains, saw that in that position, Flagg could not see where they went. Then the heavy-set man put the gun away.

By careful concentration, Flagg was able to trace their progress to Charles and Beacon Streets. Here the car turned left and a minute later, turned right. The driver shifted gears almost immediately, but even in second the sedan whined a protest.

Flagg knew they were bound for "The Hill," one of Boston's oldest sections. A district honey-combed with narrow, one-way streets. Some were dead-end, nearly all were precipitous in their slopes, where skid-chains were as necessary as the steering wheel to a car in snowy weather. Here, in this relatively small section, was a unique melting pot. On one side the State house, and the bluebloods; on the other, the slums.

THE sedan turned left, turned right and climbed again. For five minutes a succession of turns, climbs and dips, left Flagg completely lost.

Then the sedan stopped. The thin man said: "O. K. Get out—and walk to the entrance opposite this car."

Flagg did as directed because he knew it was his one chance to be taken to the men he wanted to see. He slid from the car, and the two passengers and the driver surrounded him, shoved him toward a darkened entryway.

For one brief moment his alert eyes framed a picture of the street. He saw he was within thirty feet of a corner, but no street sign told him his whereabouts. Darkened, forbidding tenements, built

flush with the sidewalk, crowded in on the curbing.

He caught a momentary glimpse of two small boys trudging through the snow dragging sleds.

Then Flagg was stumbling up steep stairs where a single dim bulb at each landing cast weird shadows over the narrow stairwell. On the third floor, the driver stopped at a door on the left and knocked three times, rapidly; twice slowly. The door opened and Flagg stepped into a lighted room.

It was sparsely furnished with one table and a few odd chairs. The dirty floor was bare. Behind the table sat two men. One was thin; the other big, muscle-bound. The light was behind them so that their hats, pulled low, cast concealing shadows over their faces.

"All right, you two," rapped the bigger one to Flagg's guards. "Go back to your places."

As the door swung shut, Flagg saw the man who had been standing behind it. He stiffened, felt his nerve ends tingle. A leveled automatic, held steady, covered him. But it was the man's face that spread the quick flaring hate through his veins. The pale staring eyes of a killer stared at him out of that thin, rat-like face—the face of the man who had murdered Officer McCarthy.

"Got the money?"

Flagg turned toward the big man behind the table. "Let's see the necklace."

The man reached in his pocket, tossed an exquisitely formed rope of pearls on the table. Flagg's eyes fastened on that soft delicate glow of lustrous pink and he took a step forward.

"Hold it!" The command was a snarl. "Let's see the money."

Flagg hesitated. He glanced at the killer who stood ten feet away to the left of him. He turned back toward the table. Then he reached in his pocket and pulled out the envelope.

The triumphant curse that rang in his ears told him the story before the big man had scooped up the necklace and thrust it in his pocket. Framed!

"Toss it over!" The command was like the crack of a whip.

Flagg hesitated. He had planned the offensive himself. But he hadn't counted on that killer behind the door. Now—

"Toss it up!" The big man's voice was smooth, cold. "And we'll let you out. If not—if we have to take it from you—" His chuckle was a rattle in his throat. "You know what to do, Leo." He looked at the killer.

FLAGG'S shoulders tensed for action. His eyes flicked to the man with the gun, back to the table. He lifted the envelope and tossed it carelessly forward. The throw was short. The package hit the edge of the table, fell back on the floor. Quickly, he stooped to pick it up, reached for the envelope with his left hand.

His body screened his right arm from the killer who stood at his left. And his right hand was in his coat pocket before the rat-faced man realized what was happening, The man at the table yelled a warning.

Flagg fired across his chest as the automatic belched fire. The two shots sounded as one, but as he felt the slash of hot lead across the back of his neck, just above the collar, he knew his shot was a watch tick ahead.

The killer's face was slack-jawed as the eyes reflected their amazement. Flagg saw him swallow once. He coughed. The gun slipped to the floor. The man swayed, then curled up and fell on top of it.

The envelope was still in Flagg's hand as he straightened and covered the two by the table.

"Keep your hands on the table!" he

rapped. He stepped behind them and took a gun from each man. Then he said: "Now let's have a look at the necklace."

The big man glowered, but he obeyed. Flagg picked up the string, moved over to the light and inspected it. He grunted savagely and tossed it back on the table. He took out a handkerchief and rubbed the back of his neck. He could feel the trickle of blood down his collar.

He said: "One of you call Kresser. Think up a story, get him here."

"Like hell!"

"Maybe, but call him. If you don't, you'll burn for the murder of that cop and Kresser'll go free."

"Call him, Quint," snapped the thin man. "He's in it—he's got to stand the gaff just like us."

The big man grunted. Crafty guile suffused his thick face as he stepped to the telephone by the door. When he hung up two minutes later he had unfolded a reasonable story to Kresser.

"He'll come," he sneered. "We'll have our showdown with him when he gets here. But if you think it's gonna do you any good—"

Flagg laughed and the rasping tones echoed through the room. "That's swell," he said. He leaped to the phone. A moment later he was barking into the mouthpiece.

"Hello—Brady? I told you I'd give you a break, didn't I? Well, here it is. Go to the Colony Theatre in a squad car—and make sure it's full. Watch for Kresser—follow him. He'll bring you to the guys that have the necklace—if he doesn't see you tailing him."

LOUIS KRESSER burst into the room fifteen minutes later. He opened his mouth to speak but the words froze on his lips as he stared into the muzzle of Flagg's gun.

Quint snapped: "Were you followed?"

"Y—yes." Kresser stammered in fright. "A big touring. It turned off Charles right behind me. But it had no chains—got stuck on the hill."

"What a break." Quint's voice was gloating. "They'll never find you now." He whirled on Kresser as a sudden thought seemed to strike him. "Did you let your cab go?"

"Yes."

Quint laughed. "Now what, sucker?"

Flagg's lip curled. "Sit down, Kresser," he said casually, "while I tell you a bedtime story.

"The original idea was just to snatch the necklace, wasn't it?" Kresser was tight-lipped. "But when I stuck my nose in the set-up, you saw a way to get another ten grand out of it, eh? You called Burks to witness your instructions—so that when they took me for the cash, I'd be the fall guy.

"But Burks didn't come in until after you described the necklace. I wondered about that. I also wondered why, although you said you got the letter in the morning, you didn't call me in until too late to stop in on Ballard and Company. But it didn't matter. I called old Ballard himself."

Flagg snorted disdainfully. "That flaw you so carefully pointed out was in the imitation necklace you mugs had made—after you got the idea of the reward. Ballard told me *there was no flaw in the real necklace.*

"You played it all ways against the middle didn't you, Kresser? If I'd lost the ten grand and got no necklace—that would've been swell. If I'd been smart enough to hold out the dough, I'd have been slipped the phony string—with your flaw, and I'd still be in the bag. Because you would've denied your description of that off-color pearl.

"Just a sucker, wasn't I, Kresser? You had a sweet idea. But you made one bad mistake. You killed a cop."

Flagg's voice hardened and his eyes flashed menacingly. "I got the guy that killed McCarthy—but that's not enough. You'll all burn for this—you're guilty as hell. Now give me that necklace, the real one."

No one made a move. Kresser seemed petrified with fear. The other two men wore masks of hate. Flagg stepped forward, snatched up the fake necklace, leaned over and slammed the side of his gun against Quint's face.

"Come on. Fork over or I'll take all three of you apart with the butt of this gun. And believe me, it's one job I'd like."

"Give it to him, Quint," groaned Kresser.

Flagg lifted the gun again. Quint cringed. He cursed, finally withdrew another necklace from an inside pocket and threw it on the table. Flagg picked it up.

"That's better," he said and backed toward the door.

"Drop it!"

A hard, round object jabbed at the back of his neck and froze Flagg to the spot. He hesitated, saw the triumphant looks spread over the features of the men he covered. He could get one—but there was business in that voice. He let the gun drop.

Quint said: "Great work, Hymie."

"Yeah," came the voice behind Flagg. "I stayed outside after I brought Kresser up. I heard you cursing—thought I'd better sneak in and have a look."

"O. K." Quint picked Flagg's gun from the floor, took the two belonging to him and the thin man from his pockets. Then he slapped Flagg's hips, felt under his arm.

"How does it look now, sap?" he leered. He gave a gun to the thin man, another to Kresser. "We'll just tie this mug's hands and take him bye-bye."

He disappeared down a hall and returned a minute later with a length of rope. He tossed it to the man behind Flagg. "Tie his hands, Hymie."

"Behind your back, punk!" said Hymie.

FLAGG'S arms hung limply at his side. Yet every nerve, every muscle in his lean body was tense, ready for action. He hesitated, then slowly moved his hands to the small of his back. He felt Hymie's hands touch his, felt the lint of the rope.

Flagg's left hand locked around Hymie's wrist in a grip of steel. He pivoted, twisted his body savagely as the man yelled in surprise. His right hand darted up under his coat. A vicious jerk and the automatic was free. Like a snake striking, his left hand released the wrist and the arm wrapped around Hymie's body.

A tableau of death filled the room. The three guns, held steady, were leveled at him and the luckless man he held as a shield. His own was trained on Quint who stood in the center.

He said: "Drop 'em!" But he knew as he spoke is was useless.

The men stood waiting, recovered now from their amazement, confident they had him. If he shot Quint, the other two would open up, the room would be a slaughter house.

And strangely enough, in that tense moment, it was not his own skin he thought of. He only knew that if he went out there would be no necklace for DeRocca, no reward for Mrs. McCarthy.

He hugged the struggling, panic-stricken Hymie. Another few seconds and it would be too late. He shifted the gun slightly, gradually until it was trained on the lone light on the wall.

He squeezed the trigger. The room was a well of blackness as he felt the slap of recoil in his hand. He dropped to

the floor as the guns barked, and reached for the doorknob. He found it, jerked it wide and ducked through the opening as wood splintered at his head.

He plunged down the stairs and made the turn before a second volley rang out from above. Footsteps pounded behind him as he gained the lower hall and remembered the men on guard. They were getting out of the car as he reached the entrance.

He fired twice, heard the crash of glass, saw the men duck for cover. As he raced for the corner he muttered: "If Brady's around, that ought to bring him."

He turned the corner, looking for a taxi, a passing car, or shelter. Then his eyes fell on the ragged urchin with a sled. Flagg grunted in satisfaction as the idea struck him. He grabbed the sleigh.

"I'll leave it at the bottom of the hill, kid," he rapped.

He took two long, running steps down the slippery pavement and threw himself flat on his stomach on the sled. Three shots cracked out from behind him. Snow flicked up in his face from one that came close. But he was a tough target now, a flat one, a speeding one.

Below him, down a slope that took his breath away, he saw the thick traffic of Charles Street.

It was a mad, headlong flight now. The sensation of flying gripped him as he flashed by street intersections.

Then he gave his attention to the new menace in the form of onrushing Charles Street. He dug his toes in the snow, knew at once that he could not stop this crazy steed that threatened to carry him to destruction.

Grasping the rope of the sled, he deliberately threw his body over the side. He felt the bite of snow, the shock of impact. The world was upside down as he skidded and rolled over and over. Then he was flat on his face, sliding headlong.

He got to his feet when it was over and stood uncertainly while he got his breath. Then he laughed. A full-throated, buoyant laugh which was a mixture of delight and relief. His heart still raced, hot blood rushed through his body.

Still chuckling, he brushed himself off. He looked back up the hill and saw the approaching form of the outraged child. He took a five-dollar bill from his pocket, twisted it around the rope of the sled and stepped into Charles Street to flag a taxi.

FIVE minutes later Flagg's cab had circled back around the block and up the hill. Two squad cars now stood in front of the tenement, attracted, as he had hoped, by the gunfire. Three cops and a plainclothesman guarded the entrance.

The plainclothesman was Brady. He walked over to the cab.

"It won't be long now," he said. They're in here—and we got 'em surrounded. We're waiting for more tear bombs." He hesitated. "Where the hell did you call from—where you been?"

"Me?" Flagg laughed again and found it hard to keep the chuckle from his voice. "I've been for a ride—a real, old-fashioned sleigh ride."

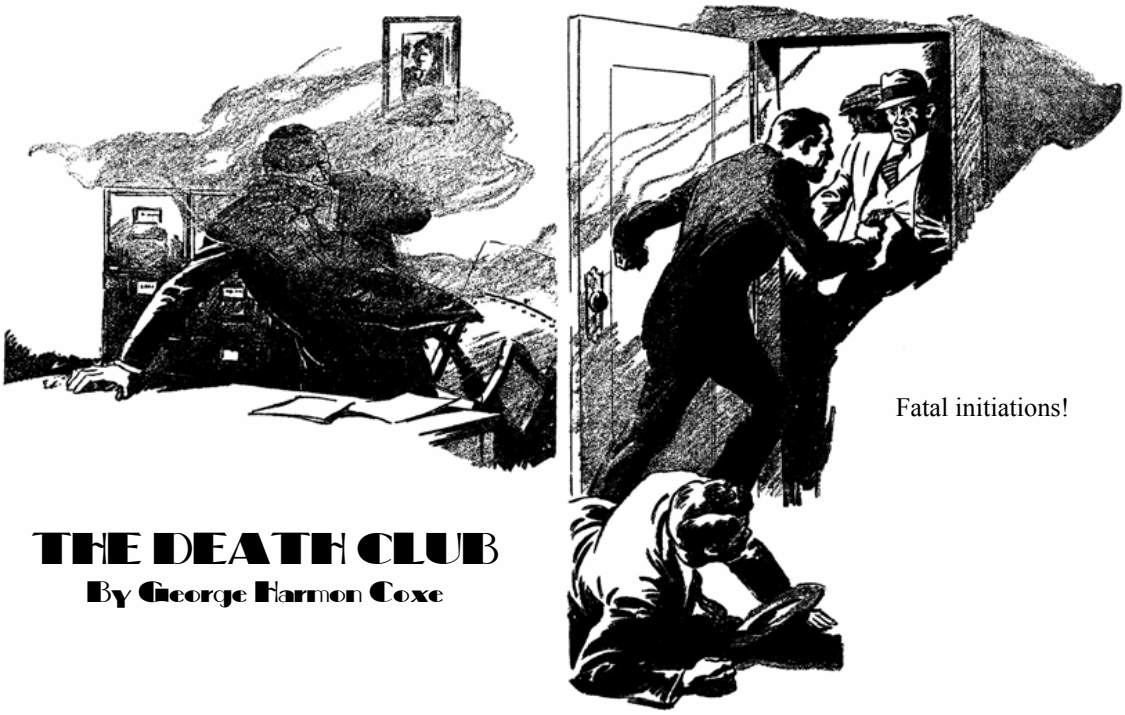
"Yeah?" snorted Brady. "Well you talk kinda screwy to me. But it's okay. I'm obliged for the tip—but here's once when you weren't in on the show-down."

"That's what you think." Flagg cocked one eyebrow. "I'm going down to see Marie DeRocca—we got a date."

"DeRocca?" snapped Brady. "What d'ya mean?"

"I've got to return the necklace, haven't I?" Flagg saw the sergeant's eyes pop and he said: "Look me up at my apartment later—I've got a present for Mrs. McCarthy."

Complete Stories, December 15, 1933



Fatal initiations!

THE DEATH CLUB

By George Harmon Coxe

CHAPTER I.
Initiation.

GARAGE doors locked securely, George Dunlap said, "All right," and started across the lawn in back of the square white house which stood in the center of a five-acre plot.

Walt Harper fell in step behind Dunlap and followed him through inky shadows to the narrow walk that skirted the darkened house. Heels clicked hollowly on the concrete, echoing out from the side of the structure until the two men swung around the corner and up the front steps.

Dunlap unlocked the door. Harper unbuttoned his coat so he would have free access to his left armpit, and pressed in through the doorway behind his companion.

Dunlap snapped the light switch as Harper shut the door. A yellow glow bathed the spacious, luxuriously furnished hall.

Harper said, "I'll go up with you."

Dunlap nodded, stepped forward, and ascended the wide staircase. At the second floor landing he turned right, and Harper followed him down the thickly carpeted corridor to the last room on the left. Harper reached in front of the other man, threw open the door and stepped into the darkened room.

A switch clicked, light flooded the bedroom. From a position flat against the near wall a thin, pasty-faced man with a pointed nose swung a blackjack.

Harper moved with the click of the switch, moved sidewise away from that wall. But he was unable to move far enough. The blackjack glanced from the side of his head, and he stumbled as he reached for his gun. From the left a burly figure catapulted into him and knocked him to the floor. A third man grabbed Dunlap and yanked him into the room.

Harper rolled to his knees. He slugged the pasty-faced man with his free hand, but the burly man clung to the gun wrist. Harper got to his feet, pulling the other man with him. The fellow lowered his head and charged. Harper backed two steps and fell over a chair. The gun was torn loose from his grasp. Four hands jerked him to his feet and slapped him back against the wall.

Standing there, Harper made a high, narrow figure against the cream-colored paper. The well-tailored suit which lent a deceptive slenderness to his well-knit figure was bunched at the shoulders. A dull glow of hate sprang from his brown eyes as they flicked across the room, and the lips below the

trim mustache were flat against his teeth.

The thin man with the blackjack glowered at him, but on the burly one's face was a grin. He had something of the ape about him. He was bowlegged, his arms were long, his fists knotty. His face was flat, and thick muscles tightened the sleeves and shoulders of his suit.

He turned and tossed Harper's gun to the third man, a thickset blond with eyes too small for his face who stood with his hand on Dunlap's wrist.

Harper's left lashed out, caught the bowlegged man on the cheekbone. The thin man swung the blackjack. Harper took it on the shoulder and hooked a right to the face. The fellow cursed and the bowlegged man pulled his chin down on his chest and came forward.

Harper bounced a left and a right off that lowered head, trying to reach the jaw. He took four short-arm jabs to the face and body in return. He sidestepped a looping right, spun about, reached for a heavy bookend on a bedside table. Then the thin man used the blackjack again.

Harper went to his knees. The man said, "Lemme polish him off now, Slug."

Slug laughed. "Don't be silly, Leo. This guy likes it." He pushed Leo to one side, reached down and jerked Harper to his feet. "Don't you like it, baby?" He put all his weight behind the next blow and smashed his fist to Harper's mouth.

Harper staggered, but kept his feet. He shot another left and right, which connected but lacked power. He was out on his feet, but he avoided Slug's next punch, pivoted and lashed out at Leo.

Over in the corner of the room the bald, spindly-legged Dunlap stood white-faced, wide-eyed. The blond man left him and stepped toward Harper.

"Come on, Slug," he said. "We got things to do."

"O.K. Just a minute." Slug grinned and his little eyes gleamed with satisfaction. "For a private dick he can take it. I ain't had so much fun since—"

He broke off as Leo, bleeding at the lips from Harper's punches, swung the blackjack. It connected behind the ear where Harper's dark hair was flecked with gray.

Harper's head rolled and he fell forward.

Slug said, "You're a heel, Leo." He bent over, grabbed Harper by the lapels, and yanked him to his knees. Then, holding him upright with his left, he leaned far over and smashed his right, backed by his entire weight, into Harper's face.

Harper's head bounced back against the wall. He fell over on his side and lay still.

WHEN Walt Harper recovered consciousness he was alone. He rolled over on his back and groaned. Then he crawled laboriously to the bed on his hands and knees, drew himself erect. He steadied himself with his left hand on the end of the bed, lurched toward the closed door. Near it he stumbled and went down on his knees, but his left hand, thrown wildly out, caught the knob and he pulled himself to his feet again.

He stood there for some moments before trying to open the door. There was a lump on his forehead, another behind his ear. One eye had a cut over it, and blood had trickled down to mat the dark eyebrow; the other eye was swollen partly shut. There was a gash on one cheekbone, both lips were split and the lower jaw was lumpy.

Harper turned the doorknob and the door swung open as he lurched against it. He staggered into the hall, headed for the stairs, checked himself with his hand on the banister. From somewhere down the other end of the hall came a muffled groan. He stood there, weaving back and forth on his feet like a punch-drunk fighter, then started down the hall, his hand feeling along the wall for support.

He stopped opposite the second door on his left. From behind the panels the muffled tones sounded again. He swung into the room and groped for the light switch. He found the button, pushed it, and the resulting glow showed another bedroom, done in yellow with dainty, feminine hangings and pale-green furniture.

On the bed, fully clothed and with hands and feet securely bound, lay a girl. Blond hair fell about her shoulders. China-blue eyes, wide under penciled brows, stared out of a flushed face. A twisted towel had been thrust across an opened mouth and tied around her neck.

Harper seemed to stiffen. He moved unsteadily to the bed, picked at the cord binding the girl. He thrust trembling fingers into a vest pocket, took out a small penknife. He managed to open a blade and cut the ropes.

The girl sat upright as he untied the towel and began rubbing her wrists.

Harper dropped on the bed beside her and said, "Whisky."

The girl's eyes never left his face as she got up from the bed. She continued staring at him for a

second, the look in her eyes a mixture of pity and revulsion. "I'll see," she said, and left the room.

Harper was still sitting upright on the bed, bracing himself with his hands, when the girl returned. She carried a glass and a square brown bottle. She drew the cork and poured an inch of whisky into the glass.

Harper tossed it off in one gulp. He coughed once, then reached for the bottle. The girl gave it to him, and he poured another third of a glassful. This he drank quickly and drew back his lips as the alcohol burned the cuts.

The girl dropped into a straight-backed chair, her eyes still on Harper. He returned the gaze, looking through the bloodied eyebrow without lifting his head. Finally he said, "How long have you been tied up here?"

"Over an hour. I was downstairs reading. When I went to answer the doorbell the three of them rushed in."

"Where's the housekeeper?"

"She stays with her mother one night a week. Tonight's the night." She leaned forward in the chair, rubbing her wrists absently. "Is—is uncle all right?" There was fear in her voice.

"I don't know." Harper told what had happened, and as he finished the girl uttered a frightened cry, as though some forgotten memory had accused her, and sprang toward the dresser.

"They left a note," she said, at the same time picking up a piece of paper propped against the mirror. She glanced quickly at it, handed it to Harper.

He looked at her for a moment without reading the note. One hand strayed to his face, explored with gentle fingers the bruises and cuts. Then he dropped his eyes, read:

If your uncle's life means anything to you, don't call the police. We will get in touch with you later. Don't be alarmed if you don't hear from us for a week or ten days.

Harper tossed the note to the bed. His mustache twitched above a bitter smile and his voice was hoarse, unemotional. "I'm going back to your uncle's room, get fixed up. I'll want to talk to you."

The girl got to her feet. "Let me—bathe those cuts—"

"Afterward." Harper moved toward the door, paused with his hand on the knob. "I'm going to take a cold shower. When I come back you can stick some adhesive tape where it'll do the most good."

WALT HARPER'S appearance was considerably improved when he finished dressing after his shower. There was no longer any blood on his face and the cuts were clean. He gave a final tug to his tie, lighted a cigarette, turned away from the chest of drawers, and looked slowly about the room.

He inhaled deeply, blew out smoke in a thin stream. He righted the overturned chairs, walked over and opened a closet door. He pawed over a half-dozen suits, looked down at the shoes, the portmanteau and Gladstone bag in the far corner. Coming back to the chest he began at the top and examined the furnishings that filled the drawers.

There was a leather-covered wastebasket at the foot of the bed. He stepped to it, pulled out a newspaper, picked up the single envelope that lay beneath. It was empty and postmarked

Boston, Mass. June 17 1933. 6:30 P.M.

Harper turned over the envelope in his hands. He stuffed it into his pocket, stood motionless, his brown eyes thoughtful. He rubbed his mustache with the index finger of his right hand, reached back into his pocket, took out the envelope and stared at it.

"Mailed Saturday," he said softly, "and today's Monday." He grunted, turned on his heel, and went back to Aileen Reynolds's room.

She had recovered her composure now. Her blond hair was neatly done and her skin was pink and fresh-looking without makeup. The corners of her mouth were still red where the pressure of the towel had left its mark. She had a bottle of iodine, some cotton, gauze, and adhesive tape, and she started to work as soon as Harper sat down.

When she had finished there was a strip of plaster across Harper's eyebrow, another across his cheek bone, a third on his forehead. His left eye, blue-circled, was about half-open.

Harper poured another drink, stepped over to the straight-backed chair and eased into it. "How are you fixed for money?" he asked. And when the girl's eyes widened he added, "I mean, were you dependent on Dunlap?"

"No. When father died he left me about two hundred thousand in trust."

Harper's figure stiffened in the chair and his voice was sharp as he spoke. "In George Dunlap's bank?"

"No. The City National."

Harper leaned back in the chair. "Your uncle's had some threatening letters from depositors since his bank closed. You know, of course, that I've been hired to see that none of these threats are carried out."

"But what will we do now?"

Harper surveyed the tips of his shoes. Then he looked at the girl and said, "I don't know—yet." He hesitated and his voice was level as he continued, "As far as I know, George Dunlap was not to blame for the crash. Was he hard up?"

Aileen Reynolds caught her underlip with firm teeth, loosed it. "I let him have some money a week ago."

The plaster on Harper's eyebrow lifted. "Much?"

"A thousand."

The plaster dropped back in place. "He was paying us a hundred a week to act as his bodyguard. But he was afraid of those letters and he offered a bonus of a thousand if he got through this first month without being smeared." Harper's eyes clouded. "I'd like to find out what it's all about."

"I'll pay you whatever you ask if you will," said the girl. "I hardly know what to do. The police—that note—"

"Never mind the police just now." Harper stood up and his voice was frigid, deliberate. "You sit tight until I tell you different. And there will be no charge for my work—just expenses. If I get him back I'll hit him for that thousand bonus."

CHAPTER II.
THE SECOND BODY.

WALT HARPER was an enigma even to his partner. When pressed for information about Harper, Tom Munn had to admit his ignorance. The two had been together in Belleau Woods, had been given adjoining beds in the base hospital. Four years previous Harper had drifted into town as an agent for the Department of Justice. Munn had been a sergeant of detectives with the local police. Two years later Harper came back. He had some money. He propositioned Munn, and the two had set themselves up as private detectives.

That was all Tom Munn knew about Walt Harper except that he liked the game, that he was without sentiment, and that once on a case he stuck to it with the dogged determination of a bulldog.

At eleven o'clock of the morning following the kidnapping, the partners sat in their private office. The puzzled frown which creased Munn's wide, weathered forehead bore testimony to the fact that Harper was still an enigma.

Harper slouched in his chair, crossed his legs, and blew out a cloud of smoke he had been cuddling in his mouth. "What'd you find out about Dunlap?" he asked.

Munn grunted. "You call up at eleven o'clock last night and expect me to—"

"You've had all morning." Harper rubbed first one side of his mustache, then the other. He was dressed in a neat gray flannel suit, his blue shirt was fresh, and his black oxfords were polished to a mirror-like perfection. Except for the three small patches on his face and a slightly discolored eye, his dark, handsome features bore no trace of his beating.

"Both hours," snorted Munn. "But"—he sat up in his chair—"I got most of the stuff. So far, Dunlap is clear with the bank examiner. Up till now, the failure of the State Street Trust was due to just one of those things—frozen assets.

"Dunlap is about broke, according to appearances. The clerk in the safe-deposit vaults is still on duty. He says Dunlap was in to open his box a week ago, and again yesterday morning. But what's this idea of going to Boston?"

Harper uncrossed his long legs, stretched them out in front of him. His chin rested on his chest and he looked up at Munn without raising his head. "That's where Dunlap is," he said calmly.

"Yeah?" Munn scowled. "What makes you think so?"

"A hunch that started with the envelope I told you about. After I called you last night I called Bob Brooks over at the airport. Two strangers chartered a plane for New York yesterday afternoon—so Brooks said. Dunlap left with them last night."

HARPER hesitated a moment while he ground out his cigarette in an ashtray on the desk. "So I went over and had a talk with Brooks."

"Well?" pressed Munn.

"I found out that the pilot expected to come right back, getting in here around seven in the

morning. He did. His customers changed their minds. They went to Boston and gave him a century to say he'd been to New York. The pilot's hitting the hay now. He's gonna be ready to take off with me at noon."

"Who the hell's gonna pay for it?"

Harper's mustache twitched above a flickering smile. "Miss Aileen Reynolds."

"That's different." Munn grinned, slipped a cigar from his vest pocket. He bit off the end, flicked it from his mouth with a snap of his tongue and lighted it. "How much is in it for us?"

"Our expenses."

Munn jerked upright in his chair, his cigar shooting up at a sharp angle from the corner of a mouth clamped like a vise. "So business is picking up?"

"Look at it from another angle," said Harper levelly. "We get hired on a routine job; some outsiders gang me and snatch Dunlap. How's it going to look when the papers break it over the front page? Anyway, if he's alive, we still get our grand."

Munn got up from his chair, paced back and forth across the floor twice, then stopped in front of the window, his back to the room. Harper's eyes followed his partner, seemed to take in the shapeless hang to Munn's wrinkled brown suit.

"You ought to get yourself a new suit," he said thoughtfully, "and keep it pressed."

Munn spun about. He opened his mouth twice before he spoke. "You keep slicked up enough for both of us," he growled.

"But I'm gonna be away for a few days." Harper grinned. "It's up to you to keep the firm dressed up."

Munn came back to his chair, dropped into it and puffed his cigar so hard it began to burn unevenly.

Harper reached into his inside coat pocket, pulled out a folded sheet of paper and tossed it across the desk. Then he took a gold knife from his vest pocket, opened up the file blade, and began smoothing his fingernails.

Munn grunted, took the cigar from his mouth, placed it on the edge of the desk and picked up the piece of paper. He unfolded it, read it. When he finished he looked at Harper; then he read the paper again.

"Special investigator for the district attorney?" he snorted. "How the hell did you wangle that?"

Harper reached out with one hand, took the paper, tucked it away in his pocket, and continued with his nails. "For one month," he said. "I made a deal."

"With what?"

"With the Dunlap story."

"You tipped off the D.A.?" Amazement flooded Munn's weathered features and his eyes went wide. "The cops'll raise hell with this; they raise hell with every kidnapping."

"No doubt," said Harper, unruffled. "But this isn't a kidnapping."

Munn spat out an oath.

"Keep your shirt on!" Harper's voice took on a thin, metallic ring. He put away his knife and sat up. "This job was pulled on the one night the housekeeper was away. While they were ganging me, Dunlap had plenty of chance to run for it. I called the girl this morning. One of his small traveling bags is missing. And since when do they snatch supposedly bankrupt bankers?"

Munn waved his cigar in an arc of jerky impatience. "You think it was a frame?" he snapped. "What'd you tell the D.A.?"

"I told him what happened last night. That's all." Harper glanced at his wristwatch. "The cops have not a single lead. They won't know about the airport unless they stumble on it. Aileen Reynolds will tell them only what happened to her. They can't put the bee on me because I'm on my way. So if you don't spill things, what'll they have?"

Harper walked over to the desk, took from a drawer what looked like a nickel-plated pencil and clipped it to his vest pocket. He picked up a suitcase and said, "Sit tight till you hear from me."

HARPER swung out of the red, four-place monoplane at the Boston airport at four o'clock in the afternoon. He shook hands with the pilot, then walked across the runway to the administration building. Without waiting to make any inquiry, he summoned a taxi, piled in and said, "Barker House."

He rode across the East Boston ferry without leaving the cab, and five minutes later was entering the School Street entrance of the hotel. He registered, asked for a room on the top floor. As soon as he was alone he opened his bag, took out a pint of rye. He poured a drink, tossed it off, stepped into the bathroom for a swallow of water. Then he got busy on the telephone.

He made three calls and sat down to wait. He had two more drinks while he waited, and ten minutes later three knocks sounded on the door. He called, "Come in," and watched a big, lazy-looking man with a round face and a heavy nose swing through the door.

Harper got up, offered his hand and said, "Hello, Charlie."

"Hi, Walt." Charlie pumped Harper's hand. "Last time I saw you, you were with the Feds."

Harper waved Charlie toward a chair by the window. He got a clean glass from the bathroom, offered this and the half-filled bottle. "How's the agency business in Boston?"

"Rotten." Charlie poured himself a drink, but set the glass on the windowsill while he lighted a cigar and puffed it into life. He gulped the whisky, sucked his lips a moment, and thrust the cigar between discolored teeth. "Who carved their initials on your face?" he asked.

Harper's dark eyes flashed. "A couple of your local boys."

"So—"

"Yeah." Harper leaned forward in his chair. "I've made a couple calls since I been in. A sergeant down at Station No. 3, Joy Street, who I used to know in Washington, has been giving me a little information. He tells me Captain Galpin down at headquarters is a pretty right guy."

"He's so honest it hurts, and the politicians don't bother him—much."

"O.K. Now who's the biggest shot in town?"

"Louis Wyman."

"What're his rackets?"

Charlie waved his cigar idly. "For the public it's restaurants, warehouses, the trucking business. For himself, he cuts in on most everything that's got any gravy."

"Plenty of connections?"

"Plenty."

Harper leaned back in his chair, clasped his hands behind his neck so that his elbows paralleled the floor. For a moment he was silent, his face somber, but otherwise expressionless. "I've got a couple little jobs for you," he said finally. His voice was soft and he spoke slowly, thoughtfully.

"Go over to the airport. A Robin pulled in here last night—or this morning—around three o'clock. Find out if a car met the three men who got out, what kind it was and anything else you can. If it was a taxi, find the driver and get his story."

HARPER had dinner in the hotel. At eight o'clock he got a taxi, rode down Tremont Street through the evening theater traffic to Stuart Street and police headquarters. Although only a few blocks from the noisy life and movement of Tremont Street, the section in front of headquarters was quiet. A few drops of rain were beginning to fall.

He paid the driver, and a minute or two later was upstairs sitting across a desk from a square-faced man with a red nose, deep-set gray eyes, and a shock of unruly, iron-colored hair. Harper waited until Captain Galpin had read the authorization from the district attorney and returned it. Then he leaned back in his chair, crossed his legs and waited for Galpin to speak.

Galpin took the half-smoked cigar from his mouth and without looking up said, "Well, what's the story?"

"One of our local bankers disappeared last night," said Harper. "He'd had a couple threatening letters and had hired a private detective for a bodyguard." Harper gave an outline of the story without mentioning his own connection with George Dunlap. "These snatchers," he concluded, "came here in a plane early this morning."

"I believe some word came through on the teletype this afternoon on that," said Galpin. "Naturally, we'll keep our eyes open." He paused to retrieve his cigar. He knocked off the ashes with a match, lighted it again. Before he could continue, Harper interrupted.

"I understand," he said levelly, "that three local men have disappeared in the past four months; men who were in some way connected with defunct stock houses, men whose boom-time structures collapsed, leaving the public holding the bag."

Galpin took the cigar from his mouth, blew out the match, and looked at Harper from under wiry brows. His eyes narrowed slightly, and he said, "Those men were not kidnapped. They just disappeared."

Harper's eyes were opaque and his voice was as difficult to read as his eyes. "That big shot from Chicago, that public utility king from Cleveland were traced here, weren't they? And there was a judge from New York that headed this way before they lost trace of him."

Galpin's square jaws clamped on the cigar butt. "Go on," he growled. "Speak your piece."

Harper uncrossed his legs, then stretched them

out, surveyed his polished shoes. "I was just wondering why all these men in the same sort of boat, came this way?"

"What about it? Your man was kidnapped."

"Possibly." Harper looked at Galpin without lifting his head. "But I was just wondering. This might not be a bad place to jump from. It's a good port. You could ship for almost any place from this harbor. It's reasonably near Canada."

Galpin remained silent, but his gray eyes were thoughtful.

Harper looked back at his shoes, smoothed down his mustache with his index finger. "And about a month ago, I understand you picked up a man who had been so thoroughly beaten his face was unrecognizable. I understand his body was identified only through his dental work, and I understand he was one of your missing Boston brokers."

Galpin snorted and got from his chair. He walked across the room like a caged lion, paused to stare down at Harper who still stretched easily in his chair.

"Maybe there's something to it," said Galpin. "But I—" He broke off as a telephone on his desk shrilled to life. He jerked it up, slapped the receiver to his ear. He listened for several seconds, said, "O.K.," and hung up the receiver.

Galpin turned to Harper. "I've got to go out. Where you stayin'?" Harper answered and Galpin continued, "I'll call you. I want to talk with you some more."

THE body sprawled beside a narrow asphalt road which the rain had made into an oily black ribbon stretching off into the marshes. An ambulance, a police car, and a small sedan were parked, one after another at one side of the highway. Two policemen were holding a tent-like blanket over the body, while the medical examiner made his inspection. Two other plainclothesmen, Captain Galpin, and Walt Harper hovered around the blanket.

The body was that of a man of medium build. The face was like pulp. It lay face up, and although the rain had washed most of the blood from the face, it was still unrecognizable. It was dressed in new overalls and a jumper. One arm was twisted under; one leg had buckled backward from a fracture so that it seemed to hold no relation to the rest of the body.

Galpin chewed on a cigar that was out. He wiped drops of rain from his chin and turned to Harper who wore a light slicker and a felt hat turned down all around. "Lucky you came in to see me tonight. I called you because it sounded over the telephone like that other fellow we found last month. I thought maybe this might be your man."

"No," said Harper. "My man was bald and that's one thing you can't cover up." He fell silent as the examiner spoke.

"All right," he said, and straightened up from beside the body. "Might as well move him."

"What's the verdict?" asked Galpin.

"I'm not ready for my report yet," snapped the examiner. "But it looks like this fellow was beaten to death. If there were any gashes on his body I'd say he was struck by a freight train—hardly a major bone in his body not broken."

In the police car Galpin sat beside Harper. He grunted, said, "These two killings hook up. Faces smashed—"

"Dressed the same way?" interrupted Harper. He took his hat off, shook it, put it back on his head and reached for a cigarette.

"Exactly—no underwear and new overalls." The reflected light from the dash showed Galpin's face grim, his eyes narrow.

Harper lighted his cigarette, puffed silently. In the dim light his brown eyes were black pools, unblinking and steadfast.

CHAPTER III.
AT THE GOLDEN QUAIL.

WALT HARPER, in pajamas, was having breakfast in his room. His gray-flecked black hair was smooth, his injured eye was nearly normal and he had removed the adhesive tape from his face.

He was sitting in front of the window, idly watching a squatty tugboat pull four barges through the blue-green waters of the harbor toward Charlestown, when Charlie came in and said:

"Pretty soft for the visiting fireman."

"Yeah." Harper's smile was genuine, but thin. "What'd you find out?"

"Not much." Charlie went over to the table, picked a half slice of toast and crammed it into his mouth. "A taxi picked those fellows up at the airport," he muttered through the toast, and crumbs sprayed the floor. "For a wonder the guy on duty at

the office noticed the number."

"Yes?"

"It was a hot cab." Charlie drained what remained of a glass of water.

Harper got up and started to dress while Charlie slid into the vacated chair and stared out the window.

When he was satisfied with the set of his tie, Harper went over to the telephone table by the bed. He pawed through the directory, then put in a call. A moment later he was talking.

"Weather bureau? . . . I'd like to find out if it was raining the night of May 15th?" He waited for a moment with narrowed eyes fixed on the opposite wall. "Yeah? . . . It was? . . . Rained all night, and quite hard, eh? . . . Thanks a lot."

He stepped over to the dresser, slipped his watch, chain, and knife into diagonally opposite vest pockets. He felt of his fountain pen and pencil, stepped over to his traveling bag, lifted out a lightweight shoulder holster and a .38 revolver. As he adjusted the holster, Charlie lifted his eyebrows and said:

"Goin' calling?"

"Yeah." Harper slipped the gun into the holster, drew on his coat. "Where'll I find Louis Wyman?"

Charlie's eyes popped a little and he whistled softly. "We'll probably find him at the Golden Quail," he said, and gave an address off Washington Street.

"The 'we' is out," said Harper.

"But that guy is poison," sputtered Charlie, coming to his feet.

"The 'we' is out," repeated Harper. "This is just a social call."

THE electric sign that outlined the squat quail looked ridiculous in the daylight. Walt Harper opened the green door under the sign and passed into a deserted foyer. He pushed aside the curtains at the end and stepped into a rectangular room with a balcony at the far end. There were tables on both floors; all were vacant except one.

Two men, sitting at this table, got up when Harper came into the room. They were both young and white-faced, and their dark suits made them look thinner than they were. One of the men walked over to Harper.

"What's on your mind?" he said, and his hostile gaze shifted up and down Harper's slender height.

"I want to see Wyman."

The man hesitated, then walked over to his companion. They talked in low tones for a moment, then the first man came back. "Sit down," he said. "Give me your name and I'll see if he's in."

Harper dropped into a nearby chair and hooked his feet over the rungs of another one. "Harper's the name," he said.

He took a cigarette from his pocket, and watched the man walk along one side of the room and up the stairs. He circled the balcony to a door in the shadows.

Harper rose quickly and started for the stairs.

The other man at the table stood up and said, "Hey!"

Harper reached for his .38, slipped it into his side pocket. The man at the table took one step after him.

Harper picked his way hurriedly between the tables on the balcony. The door swung open as he reached it. He tried to squeeze past as the man came out, but the fellow grunted angrily and grabbed his arm. Harper swung sidewise, shook off the hand. The man stumbled, regained his balance and shot a clumsy right at Harper's chin.

Without taking his hand from his gun, Harper stepped inside the right and hooked his own left to the man's stomach. The fellow gasped loudly, clamped his hands to his belt and doubled up. Harper slipped through the doorway, shut the door and stood with his back against it.

The room was spacious and cool-looking; the rug on the floor was ankle deep. There were two steel filing cabinets, a safe, a water cooler, four chairs, and a flat-topped desk.

The man at the desk scowled and stood up. He was about the same height as Harper, but thirty pounds heavier. His brown hair was combed straight back, his eyes were pale blue and small; his teeth were so perfect they seemed false.

Harper remained motionless by the door. His dark eyes caught the blue ones of the man at the desk for a moment, then flicked to the apish-looking fellow with the flat face, bowlegs, and the long, powerful-looking arms.

"Hello, Slug," Harper said.

"Well, I'll be—" Slug's remark was vile, but after his moment of surprise, his ugly face broke into a grin. "My pal."

Wyman dropped back into his seat. Hate masked his face and he controlled his voice with an effort born of much experience. His tone was cold,

suave. "Very neat—very. And you've got plenty of crust, plenty."

"You said it, boss." Slug jerked his thumb toward Harper. "He's a tough baby. And does he like it? He's the swellest private dick I ever skinned a knuckle on and—"

"I just wanted to make a short social call," interrupted Harper. He walked to the center of the room. "I didn't expect to run into the bruiser. But at that, I'm certainly glad to see him."

The door of the room was jerked open and the two men who had been at the downstairs table rushed in. Harper swung about, but Wyman's command stopped the charge.

"Hold it!" He came around the desk and his blue eyes held a crafty look. "Now that you're here, you might as well sing your song." He glanced at the two men, who were glaring angrily at Harper, and jerked his head toward the door. "Blow!" he rapped. "Stick outside."

WYMAN went back to the desk and sat down. "Grab a chair," he said, and looked at Harper questioningly. "What's on your mind?"

Harper smiled coldly. He backed into a chair so that he faced Wyman and Slug, who stood to one side and slightly behind the desk. His hand was still in his pocket as he spoke.

"I'm looking for George Dunlap," he began. He reached into an inside pocket. Without making mention of his connection with the district attorney he took out a card which read:

HARPER & MUNN
Private Investigators

Wyman took it, but he did not look at it. His eyes, like pale-blue disks, were on Harper. "Who's George Dunlap?" he asked.

"Slug can tell you."

"And where do I fit?"

Harper smiled. "That's what I've been wondering about. A half-dozen rich men who've been in a jam have come to Boston. George Dunlap was one, and Slug brought him here. There might be"—Harper leaned back in his chair and stroked his mustache idly with his free hand—"some connection between these men and the body the police picked up last night; between that man and the one they picked up a month ago.

"I was wondering if maybe there wasn't some sort of racket back of it all. It would take somebody pretty big to swing it, I should think; somebody who knows his way around and has connections. That's why I came to you."

Wyman's face was impassive, but his nostrils dilated slightly as he glanced down at Harper's card. He looked up again and smiled deliberately.

"You think of things, don't you?" He fell silent for a moment, then continued, "I never saw a private dick yet that wasn't sticking his nose in other people's business and trying to chisel out some gravy. You stuck your nose in my business and, well"—Wyman paused—"well I don't like trouble. How about a trip to Europe?"

He leaned over on the desk, rested his weight on his elbows and forearms. "I might have a little job for you to do over there. It might take you a couple months and it might be worth about five grand and expenses."

Harper uncrossed his legs and stood up. "Sounds good," he said. "Maybe I'll take you up on it—after I find out what happened to George Dunlap. I think he gypped me out of a grand, and I want it. I'll stop by in a few days and have a talk with you." Harper backed toward the door.

Wyman looked at the detective a moment, then his flashing eyes flicked over his shoulder to Slug. He nodded his head toward Harper, and without raising his voice said, "All right, Slug."

Slug grinned and lurched forward on flat feet.

Harper took one backward step, stopped and whipped out the .38. "Stay there, Slug!" he ordered. "Stay there and keep your hands where I can see 'em." He glanced at Wyman. "That goes for you, too!"

Slug stopped and his grin turned to a scowl of anger. He took a half-step and glanced questioningly at Wyman, his hands clenching convulsively in impotent rage.

THE detective took another backward step, turned so his eyes took in the two men and the edge of the door toward which he moved.

"Drop it!"

Harper stiffened. For a second he held the gun on Slug. Both he and Wyman held their positions, but on Wyman's face, a knowing smile began to curve over his perfect teeth.

"Drop it, punk, or—"

The voice came from the wall behind Harper. There was a faint twitch of his mouth, a tightening

of the lips. Then he let the gun fall from his fingers. He turned around.

From a spot midway between the ends of the room, and above the safe, a picture had been pushed aside so that it hung askew. There was a seven-inch hole behind this, and from the circular cavity a heavy automatic protruded.

Wyman repeated his command. "All right, Slug."

The man moved toward Harper, who stood motionless, his hands at his side. Slug feinted with his left, shot a vicious right to Harper's chin. The detective slipped the punch, pivoted as Slug lurched off balance, and shot his own left behind the man's ear. Slug stumbled under the blow, spun about with a curse on his lips. Wyman's voice stopped him.

"Never mind that stuff, stupid!" he said. "There's time for that later." His laugh was a grunt. "At that I think he might take you." Wyman got up from the desk. "Get his gun."

Slug obeyed and Wyman took it. He said, "Now clear out of here. Stay outside the door; I want to talk to this dick alone." He swung his gun on Harper, glanced at the man behind the circular hole in the wall and said, "All right, Leo. Go back downstairs."

Slug's little eyes took on a hurt expression. "Don't I get a chance to work out on this baby?"

Wyman snapped, "Blow!" And to Harper, "Sit down!"

Harper dropped into a chair. He stretched his legs, and hooked his thumbs in his upper vest pockets.

Wyman said, "You were out with Captain Galpin last night. I was going to call on you, Harper; but this makes it better." When Harper responded to this by nothing more than a slight raising of his dark eyebrows, Wyman continued. "I want you to call Galpin. I want you to tell him you're on your way to catch a train for Montreal, that you've got a new lead on Dunlap."

Wyman leaned well over on the desk, so that his gun and his eyes were scarcely two feet from the detective's head. "Then I want you to wire your partner. Tell him you got a new lead and are taking the *Honoric* for Havre at midnight."

Harper sat up in his chair and his dark eyes stared into Wyman's blue ones with a careless, bland expression. "Then what?" he said quietly.

"Then we'll arrange a little trip for you."

"That's swell." Harper smiled with his lips only, and slipped his metal pencil from his vest pocket. "Got a sheet of paper?"

Wyman blinked at the sudden acquiescence. Then an expression of crafty guile suffused his handsome face. Without taking his eyes from Harper he reached down to a side drawer, took out a sheet of paper and slid it in front of him.

Harper pulled the paper toward himself. He turned the pencil idly in his hands and asked, "What am I supposed to say?"

"Say—"

The one word was all Wyman spoke. His mouth was open when Harper flicked the clip on the pencil with his thumb. There was a faint click, then a louder click as the .38-caliber gas shell exploded in Wyman's face. The man coughed, dropped his gun, and clawed at his eyes and nose.

Harper leaped from the chair as the white cloud of smoke-like tear gas enveloped Wyman's head. With catlike quickness he snatched up his gun, slipped the now empty pencil into his pocket, and sprang toward the door.

He jerked it open. Slug, who must have been half-leaning against the steel panel, stumbled inward. Harper, the gun held flat in his hand, slapped it against the side of the man's head. Slug kept right on falling. He hit the floor and was trying to get up when Harper turned toward the other two men who had been standing near the door.

He jammed the gun into the stomach of the nearest man, said, "Back up, Jack!"

The fellow drew back. Harper withdrew the gun, reached out with his left hand, grabbed the shoulder of the other man. He spun him about like a top and stuck the gun in his back.

"Let's go!" he said softly. "Tell your pal to lead the way. And if anyone should make a pass at me, guess what's gonna happen to you."

The procession of three moved quickly along the balcony, down the stairs and across the lower floor.

CHAPTER IV.
NINE OR TEN?

I'VE been doing some newspaper reading this afternoon." Harper sat in Captain Galpin's office at nine o'clock that evening. A cigarette hung from one corner of his mouth. "Back numbers." He looked up at Galpin and smiled. "There's about

thirty thousand in reward for our missing rich men. Could you use half of that?"

Galpin waited until he had lighted a fresh cigar before answering. Then he said, "I could if it's on the level, and it comes my way."

"You haven't identified the man we found last night?"

"No. We got in touch with New York, Chicago, Cleveland. It'll be another day before we get anything definite."

Harper nodded, flicked the ash from his cigarette. "I found one of the birds that came here with Dunlap."

Galpin jerked upright in his chair. "Where?"

"I went calling on Louis Wyman. It was one of his men."

Galpin's jaw went slack. His eyes widened. "You mean—"

Harper smiled and nodded. "I've had a funny hunch ever since I started digging on this thing. And the more I dig, the more I think of the hunch." Harper spoke slowly and thoughtfully. "I think these disappearing rich men came to Boston because somebody sold them an idea.

"Most wealthy men have cash and bonds put aside in safe-deposit boxes, so they'll have an anchor to the windward. I'm wondering if somebody didn't sell them on the idea of a rich man's hideout. A place where they could drop out of sight; where those who were in danger of cranks could be safe; where those who might tangle with the D.A. could wait until they knew which way the wind blew."

"It sounds crazy," Galpin grunted.

Harper shifted his gaze from the ceiling to Galpin and smiled. "But," he said, "the facts are crazy, too. You picked up one Boston broker—dead. You picked up another one last night. He'll be one of those missing men just as sure as you're sitting there. We know Dunlap came here—after being to his safe-deposit box."

"But who's knocking 'em off, and why?"

Harper's voice took on a chill quality. "I don't know," he said, "unless they've been kept until they were milked dry of their funds, and then tossed out for the city to bury."

"Rats!" Galpin got up, chewed on his cigar, sat down again.

"Maybe. But that's how I happened to call on Louis Wyman. I had no hunch about him, understand. Only I figured it would take somebody who was big, who had connections in other cities, to sell the proposition for a cut.

"The biggest shot in Boston is Wyman. That's why I went to him first. It was just luck I happened to run across Slug."

"Slug?" shouted Galpin. "Is he the guy?" He reached for the telephone, but Harper checked him.

"Don't bother. I don't think you'll be able to pick him up tonight. And if you did it would be tough to pin anything on him without Dunlap."

Harper got up from his chair. He went over to the desk, leaned forward so his eyes were less than two feet from Galpin's. "Could you get a search warrant for Wyman's warehouse out in Dorchester tonight?"

Galpin scowled. "I doubt it. He's got too many friends. Tomorrow maybe."

"Tomorrow's too late." Harper felt of his pencil, of the .38 under his arm. "He knows my guessing is getting hot."

"But why the warehouse?" asked Galpin, puzzled.

"It's the one place he owns that's made to order. I had a friend of mine drive me around a bit this afternoon. I stopped there, put up a bluff, flashed a badge and looked the place over."

"What'd you find?"

"Nothing definite."

"Then—"

"Will you stick around here for a couple hours—wait for a call from me?"

"Sure. But the warehouse—"

"The warehouse is ten stories high—according to those little windows outside." Harper moved toward the door and stopped to face the captain. "The elevator, when it reached the iron covering at the top of the shaft, *had only passed nine floors*."

Galpin's face twitched, but he did not speak.

Harper went to the door, stopped with his hand on the knob. "Did you ever see a man who'd fallen from a high building—say ten stories?"

"No," said Galpin thickly.

"I think you have. The fellow you picked up last night, aside from his face, looked like a man I saw who'd tumbled out of a twelfth-story window. The rain would wash away any trace of where the bodies landed—on both nights."

TEN minutes later a sedan stopped on a dark, deserted street in a neighborhood of wholesale establishments, and loft buildings, extending along

a railroad spur.

Walt Harper said, "Turn off the lights, Charlie. Leave the buggy here."

The two men got out, turned past a plumbing supply house, walked down a dead-end street which was swallowed up in the blackness of barren lowlands. They passed an alley, walked by a wholesale paint company, whose windows were like shiny black paper, and stopped at the alley which separated this from a tall, thick-looking building unrelieved by any light except a dim glow at a center door on the street floor.

Harper said, "Maybe we can do a job on the watchman."

The two men moved slowly along the barren brick wall, stopped in front of a wide metal door. Harper cocked his head and looked up the bare, severe façade to the two small, turret-like corners. Four narrow, iron-barred windows on each floor gave the place the appearance of a fortress—or prison.

"O.K.," said Harper. "Knock." As he spoke he slipped his gun from the holster, and drew back against the front corner of the wall so that he faced the street.

Charlie raised a big fist and pounded on the door. He waited a few seconds, pounded again. There was another half-minute of silence; then a clank of metal, like the drawing of a bar, sounded inside the building. The door was opened an inch. A faint reflection of light from the office made an orange crack. And from this jutted the ugly muzzle of a double-barreled shotgun. Behind this, as the door swung open, was the shadowy outline of a man.

"Stick 'em up!"

Charlie raised his hands and the voice continued, "That's better. Now what the hell do you want?"

"I've got some stuff stored here," said Charlie quickly. "I've got to get some of it out tonight."

"You're outta luck, buddy."

"It's just a couple small things. Won't take a minute. I can carry 'em in my arms. Come on, gimme a break."

There was a moment of silence. Then, "Come in the office till I see who you are and what you want. Keep those hands up!"

Charlie sidled past the shotgun. Walt Harper came around the corner of the doorway in a quick, silent movement. He lunged toward the guard. His right arm made a swift, chopping motion as he went forward and the barrel of his .38 whipped down on the man's head.

He stepped forward and slipped his hands under the fellow's arms, supporting him as his knees buckled. As if by prearranged signal, Charlie spun about and grabbed the shotgun before it clattered to the floor. Harper heeled the door shut, remained motionless with his burden as Charlie moved the few feet to the office door and swung into the dim glow with the shotgun held ready.

"O.K.," he said.

Harper dragged his burden into the small office and lowered the man into a chair in one corner of the room. He went back to the outer door, slipped the heavy metal bar in place securely, and returned to the office.

THE unconscious man in the chair was slender, an inch or so shorter than Harper. He wore a gray cap and trousers, and a brown suede jacket.

Harper said, "Help me get this jacket off." Charlie held the man while Harper pulled off the garment. He slipped out of his own coat, put on the jacket, substituted the cap for his hat. He stepped past a small desk to a door that opened into a closet. Rummaging there for a moment, he came back with a short length of rope and a piece of insulated wire.

In another minute the man was securely trussed and gagged. The two detectives carried him to the closet, shut the door, and turned the key in the lock.

"Now what?" Charlie asked.

Harper didn't answer for a moment. He let his glance drift about the room. He took his coat, folded it up, placed this and his hat in a lower drawer of the desk. Then he sat down in front of the desk and picked up the telephone directory. He found his number, marked it with his index finger, looked up at Charlie, and said:

"There's a fellow by the name of George Dunlap out in our town that gypped me out of a thousand bucks. I want it. Maybe I'll get it tonight. Anyway, I got an idea and I'm going to try it."

He picked up the telephone, gave his number. A moment later he said, "Louis? . . . They want you down at the warehouse right away. . . . Yeah. . . . In the office on the ground floor." He hung up the receiver.

Charlie's round face was somber. The color in his fat cheeks became a shade paler. "It's all right

for you to stick your nose in a mess of trouble," he said slowly, "but I live here. This guy Wyman's liable to cramp my style."

Harper's eyes were thoughtful. He caught his underlip in firm teeth, looked down at the desk, then back at Charlie. "Yeah," he said, "that's right." Then he smiled. "But I guess I can keep you out of it."

The telephone bell shrilled. Harper's grin was thin as he picked up the receiver. "This'll be Wyman calling back."

He said, "Yeah? . . . Sure I called you. . . . I don't know. They just told me to tell you to come to the front office." He hung up, cutting off a clicking in the diaphragm of the receiver that told of a voice which was still talking.

HARPER waited a minute, then gave another number. He said, "Galpin? . . . Harper. I'm down at the warehouse. You don't need to worry about that warrant. Bring about a dozen men down here. Charlie Buckley'll be waiting for you. He'll tell you what to do."

Harper leaned back in the chair, fell silent while he brushed his mustache with an index finger. Then he said, "Stick here till I frisk Wyman—if he comes. You can stay behind the door so he won't see you. Then go out and meet Galpin. He won't crash this place without a warrant. Have him put about four men in front, a couple more in back. There may be another way out of here, so tell him to string a couple men on the corner and on that other street. He don't have to bust in here unless he hears some shooting. But be damn sure he doesn't let anybody out."

A silence settled over the little office as Harper finished; a silence that continued, unbroken, until a knock sounded on the steel street door.

Harper jumped to his feet, picked up the shotgun. "Get out your roscoe, Charlie! You open the door for me—stay behind it until I line 'em up!"

The two men went quickly into the hall. Harper stood about four feet in front of the door and raised the shotgun; Charlie stepped forward, pulled back the bar, and drew the door inward, keeping behind it.

Louis Wyman and a short, heavyset man stood in the opening.

Harper said, "Hello, Louis. Put 'em up!"

Wyman's hands went up immediately. The other man hesitated an instant, staring at the gaping muzzle of the shotgun. Then he withdrew his hand from a bulging pocket and lifted both arms. Harper backed up, and without a command the two men stepped in, took three steps forward and turned into the office.

"Up against the wall," said Harper, and his voice was cold. "And if I were you I wouldn't turn my head."

Charlie came up beside Harper, who handed him the shotgun. Then Harper stepped forward, slid his hands over Wyman's body. There was no weapon on him, but he found a .45 automatic on the short man. He stepped back and motioned Charlie from the room. The outer door clanged shut.

Wyman said, "You're certainly digging a grave for yourself, Harper."

Harper said, "You can turn around if you want to."

Wyman turned slowly. His eyes were like ice and his jaws were white at the corners. But it was evident, from the calm way he reached into his pocket for a cigarette and lighted it, that he had been trained in emergencies. "Now what?" he said, and smoke came out with the words.

Harper smiled with his lips only, and the lips were thin. "Let's go upstairs," he said. "Galpin's bringing a dozen men to keep anyone from getting out." He motioned with the guns in each hand. "Come on. Let's try the elevator."

CHAPTER V.
THE ROOF.

LIGHT from the elevator shot pale-yellow into the corridor on the ninth floor that revealed an electric switch and a half-dozen doors on each side of the hall before it was lost in the shadows. Walt Harper motioned the two men ahead of him, stepped out on the concrete floor and pushed the light switch.

The three men walked through stale, musty air to the end of the hall where a narrow, barred window looked out into the night. They turned sharp left here and climbed steep stairs that cut back and up toward a narrow steel door.

Harper jammed his .38 in Wyman's back. "Knock," he said. "And don't let your tongue slip when they open up."

Wyman knocked, waited, knocked again. There

was a scratching noise on the door. A circular slide moved from a peephole and a three-inch shaft of light focused on Wyman's face.

"All right, Joe," he said hoarsely. "Open up."

The short man stepped into a thickly-carpeted, well-lighted hall. Harper crowded forward behind Wyman. When he passed the thin man who had opened the door, he whipped out with the automatic in his left hand. The barrel crashed behind the man's ear and he dropped with a groan.

The hall was long; on each side were four gray doors, spaced equidistant and locked by a sliding bolt on the outside. At the far end of the hall could be seen a richly furnished room.

Keeping Wyman and his bodyguard ahead of him, Harper moved to the first door on the right. He whispered a command to halt. His dark skin seemed pale now and his lips were tight. The two men stopped. He reached out and slid the bolt to the door, threw it open.

The room was in absolute darkness, and for a moment there was no sound or movement. Then, from somewhere in those shadows, came a throaty cackle, followed by a rapid string of high-pitched gibberish. A skinny, chalk-faced, gray-haired man who was naked except for his underwear came catapulting headlong through the doorway. He bounced off Harper, threw him back against the wall, started for the door to the ninth floor.

Wyman shouted. He and the short man threw themselves flat on the floor. A loud *crack* reverberated along the narrow hall. The fleeing man continued three more steps at full speed. Then he pitched forward and slid along the carpet on his face.

Harper spun toward the sound. A faint blue haze hung around a rifle barrel that was thrust through a slit above the arch leading to the front room. The rifleman made the hall an avenue of death.

The rifle cracked again. A slug tore through Harper's fingers, jerking the gun from his left hand as he fired twice, rapidly, with the one in his right. For just a moment did he hesitate. Then he dove through the doorway into the darkened room, slammed the door after him.

He shifted his gun to his left hand which, though bleeding, still had most of its strength. With his right hand, he fished a small flashlight from his vest pocket, snapped it on and wiped sudden sweat from his gray face with the back of his hand.

THE room was small with bare, gray walls. There was a bed, a dresser, and one chair. Overhead was a square, barred skylight, steel-shuttered from the roof. There was a light in the ceiling and a switch on the wall; Harper pressed it without results.

He stuck the gun in his hip pocket and dragged the dresser over to the door, which had no lock on the inside. He pulled the bed to the dresser, upended it so that it tipped against the door. He went back to the far corner and crouched on the floor.

He had not long to wait. In less than three minutes the steel door began to bounce against the dresser and the bed as weight was thrown behind it. Seconds later there was a two-inch crack through which light streamed in a yellow ribbon. Harper waited until the crack widened slightly, then sent two slugs through the opening. Silence followed this. The assault on the door ceased.

Harper waited on; waited until there was a movement overhead. Metal scraped. The steel coop which covered the skylight was withdrawn. There was no glass in the skylight. A dark blotch appeared in the opening. Harper fired twice. A curse rang out followed by the low mumble of voices.

Almost immediately something dropped to the floor of the room and exploded with a *plop*. White mist enveloped the room, spread quickly. Harper coughed and scrambled to his feet. As he leaped toward the door and snatched a sheet from the bed there was a second *plop*, followed by a third.

Harper went back to the corner, gasping for breath. He drew the sheet across his nose and mouth, but he could not stop the coughing. Tears filled his eyes and streamed down his face, blinding him.

A minute later and the door of the room began to beat against the barricade. Harper fired once, wildly. The pounding continued until the door was open halfway.

A voice said, "Throw that gun out!"

Harper uttered a choking curse, fired his last shot, and threw the gun in the direction of the door. He slipped his right hand to his vest, removed the metal pencil and shoved it up his sleeve so that no bulge revealed its location.

WYMAN took the cigar from his mouth. "Tear gas is great stuff. That evens us up for this

morning." He waved a manicured hand. "How do you like the layout?"

Walt Harper, his wrists handcuffed behind him, looked around the spacious front room, then back at Wyman. "Not bad," he said. "You keep the windows and skylights covered at night, eh?"

Wyman grinned expansively and his too-perfect teeth flashed.

Harper said, "You got imagination to think of a setup like this. What's the initiation fee?"

"Well, that varies." Wyman continued to smile. "You see it wasn't hard to find men—rich men—who wanted to lay low. And it is hard to put on a disappearing act alone. We got a line on some of these birds, and sold 'em the idea of a nice, comfortable rich man's club—"

Harper was tight-lipped, but a thin smile creased his gray face. "You mean death club."

"Have it your way," said Wyman easily. "But we told 'em they could get it for a thousand, plus a moderate monthly fee, and stay as long as they liked."

"I suppose," grunted Harper, "after you got the first two or three, you made them give you testimonial letters."

"We did just that. And we had some pictures taken of this room to make it look even better."

"And after you got them here?"

"After that we just found out how much money they could lay hold of, and made plans to get it."

"And when you got it, you tossed them off the roof on rainy nights after beating up their faces so they couldn't be identified."

Wyman shrugged. "What else could we do? If we let 'em go they'd squeal; we couldn't keep 'em here forever—too expensive. Why"—Wyman waved the hand holding the cigar in a careless sweep and lifted his eyebrows—"we only got twelve grand out of that first guy they found. Of course"—he hesitated and smiled—"our average was better than fifty, and we had eight at one time. We'd been picking them up gradually for over six months, and if you hadn't come sticking your nose in—"

He broke off as Slug entered the room and said, "We got all those guys dressed." He looked at Harper, grinned, said, "Hi, pal."

Wyman said, "O.K." He stood up, put the cigar in his mouth, took it out again. "The cops're outside; we'll go this way." He stepped over to an upright piano against the wall, pushed a button behind one leg. The piano swung slowly out, disclosing a narrow passageway. "Our private elevator's down this hall, Harper," he said, "and it connects with a tunnel that comes out in the plumbing supply house down on the corner."

A quick gleam of satisfaction lighted Harper's eyes, but his voice revealed nothing as he said, "Neat."

He turned toward the hallway and watched six men, well dressed but with terror-stricken eyes, approach the room. They were accompanied by four tight-lipped, narrow-eyed men with automatics.

One of the well-dressed men was bald. He looked up as he stepped into the room, and his eyes fell on Harper. The eyes widened with recognition and hope. He stepped forward, "Harper—" The word died in his throat, the eyes went dull as a guard pulled him toward the opening in the wall. Harper turned away.

Wyman said, "Three of you take these birds down to the corner place and wait. Lefty"—he turned to a husky fellow with yellow skin and a crooked nose—"you'll have to carry the stiff in the hall. We want this place all cleaned up. Leave the elevator door open."

He nodded his head to Slug who took Harper by the arms, and said, "Come on, baby. I want to see you do your dive."

THE flat, gravel-covered roof crunched under Harper's shoes as Slug piloted him between the mushroom-like skylight covers to the two-foot parapet. Overhead the stars glistened. To the left and in front winked a network of city lights.

Slug stopped at the parapet and said, "Say when, boss."

Wyman, holding an automatic, stood up against the wall about two feet from Harper. He said, "Take those cuffs off first. I don't want any slugs in him, nothing that might look too funny. The mashed hand won't matter when they pick him up, and nobody can prove he didn't fall by himself."

He turned to Harper, who stood motionless in the darkness with only his black mustache visible in the pale oval which was his face. "You have cramped my style, plenty. But at that, I'll be clear when we get rid of our club members."

He chuckled softly and continued, "When you bounce down on the alley, the cops are going to be busy picking you up. Slug and I will use our

elevator. All the cops'll find is an empty clubhouse—let the D.A. try and build a case out of that."

"All right, Slug." Wyman's voice was decisive. "Take off the bracelets."

Slug, standing behind Harper, fumbled with the handcuffs. He slipped them off, started to say:

"O.—"

Harper kicked backward with his heel. Slug yelled as the sharp edge bit into his shin. Harper spun toward Wyman, crouching. The automatic went off a foot from his chest and the flash of fire revealed a gray, tight-lipped face and livid eyes.

The crouch saved his life. The bullet tore through his chest, but it was high. The shock of the slug spun him sidewise as his hand jerked the pencil from his sleeve. There was a click, a burst of white vapor around Wyman's head as the tear-gas shell exploded.

Harper's body rocked as Slug's fist struck the top of his head.

Cursing, Wyman dropped the gun. He coughed, rubbed his eyes. He staggered against the wall, paused there, mouthing oaths, trying to see. Harper shot a straight left to Slug's mouth, stepped sidewise toward Wyman. Slug lowered his head and charged, both hands swinging.

Harper dropped like a shot, landed on his hands and knees. Slug's charge carried him blindly forward so that he tripped over Harper's kneeling form. The wild, swinging right fist swished through space for a foot, then connected solidly with Wyman's shoulder an instant before Slug himself fell forward against the man.

Wyman screamed as Slug's charge knocked him hard against the wall. For a moment he sat there on the parapet, his hands swinging, clutching frantically at empty space. Then he lost his balance and slid backward. The scream rose in pitch, became one long, drawn-out wail that became weirdly fainter and finally choked off short.

Harper cursed softly and rolled from under Slug's legs. He gained his feet instantly, stooped, snatched up Wyman's automatic. He jumped back, covering Slug. But there was no fight in the man now. He came to his feet slowly, weaved back and forth like a drunken man, shivering violently.

"All right," he said hoarsely. "I won't argue." He waved his hand toward the spot where Wyman disappeared. "I won't argue, after that." He shuffled off across the roof toward the yellow square that marked the stairs to the floor below.

GALPIN and five men were entering the door at the end of the hall when Harper emerged from the front room. Harper said, "You got men on the corner?" And at Galpin's, "Yes," continued, "Take this guy with you."

He drew them into the room, showed them the door to the elevator. "The rest of them have gone—they'll be in the plumbing place on the corner."

Harper waited until Slug and the policemen had disappeared through the hole in the wall. His face was still gray. His eyes were dull and his shoulders had a tired, unnatural sag as he walked across the room to a stand holding a half-filled whisky bottle and some glasses.

He picked up a glass, turned it over in his hand, and stared absently at it for several seconds. Then he poured whisky into the glass until it was half-full. He drank quickly, without stopping. Reaching toward the tray, he dropped the glass the last few inches.

He went back to an upholstered chair. He dropped into it, stretched out his legs in front of him. His hands hung down from the chair arms; he let his fingers relax. The gun dropped to the floor, and he stared up at the ceiling until he heard Charlie come pounding down the hall.

THE MISSING MAN

Ross lifted the sheet

Burgess Was Believed Drowned—But Sergeant John Ross Scented a Killing

By GEORGE H. COXE

Author of "The Perfect Frame," "Alias the Killer," etc.

"HELLO, SARG! How'sa boy?" Tom Carter, police reporter of the *Morning Express,* called the greeting as Sergeant John Ross barged past the desk on his way to the street.

Ross swiveled the unlit cigar in his mouth, glared at Carter and continued on his way without checking his stride or bothering to answer.

Carter turned to the lieutenant on duty with a shrug of mock surprise. Then, as though acting on impulse, he spun about and hurried after Ross. The big, barrel-chested sergeant's activities had furnished him with more than one story and this present attitude spurred him to action. He caught up with Ross at the doorway.

"Hey, what's up? Why the grouch?"

Ross grunted, kept his jaws clamped on the cigar stub and hurried down the steps to the sidewalk. Apparently unaware of Carter's existence, he broke across the pavement, heading for Boylston Street.

His long strides carried him over the sidewalk at a rapid pace, his lean face was grim and his eyes were fixed straight ahead.

Carter hesitated a moment on the curb, then sprinted after him. But even when he had caught up with Ross, he was at a decided disadvantage. He was a small, wiry young man, and because of the sergeant's long strides, he looked like a little boy as he trotted along at the big man's side. His blond hair was tousled under the soiled straw hat but his blue eyes seemed unnaturally bright behind his thin-rimmed glasses.

AS though sensing the futility of words, he kept silent until they reached the corner. Here Ross hailed a taxi and for a moment Carter seemed at a loss as to his next step. Then, as the cab pulled up to the curb and stopped, he circled it and quickly climbed in from the street side.

As he sank back on the seat and the driver pulled out into the traffic stream, Ross seemed to notice him.

"What the hell do you want?" he snapped impatiently. "G'wan, get out of here!" And, as though that settled the case, he lapsed into silence again.

Carter grinned in the darkness and kept still. He watched the traffic ahead. It was a late summer evening and the streets and sidewalks were filled with people relaxing after the heat of the day.

A street car clanged alongside of them, dipped down into the subway at Arlington Street. The driver pulled into the left-hand traffic lane, turned into Charles Street, turned once more into Beacon. When he stopped it was in front of a new apartment house with an atmosphere about it that hinted at high rents.

Ross got out, said "Wait," to the driver, and continued on into the foyer.

Carter tagged along, got into the elevator and rode up to the fourth floor. Ross knocked twice on the door of the south apartment before it was opened by the butler.

"Mrs. Burgess in?" Ross didn't bother to remove the cigar.

"Why—er, no sir." The butler was visibly upset, nervous. His chin trembled slightly, his hands clenched and unclenched at his sides.

"Mrs. Burgess just left. She—are you from the police?"

"Yeah. She called up a half hour ago—said her husband was missing and—"

"Yes, sir. But they called her, not five minutes ago. From the bathhouse—they found his clothes—he hadn't returned."

Ross' eyebrows lifted in surprise. His lips pursed for a moment, then straightened. "Got a phone I can use?"

"Yes, sir. This way, sir."

The butler stepped back into the foyer. Ross started to follow him, then turned, put a big hand on Carter's chest and pushed him back into the hall.

"Stay there, pest!" he growled, and shut the door in his face.

The treatment brought a flicker of annoyance to Carter's smooth face which vanished immediately in a grin. He lit a cigarette, jammed one hand in his trousers pocket and leaned nonchalantly against the wall.

WHEN Ross came out of the apartment three minutes later and started for the elevator, Carter again took up his position at the rear. They went downstairs to the cab and both of them got in.

"L Street," said Ross as he sank back on the cushions.

For a few seconds he remained silent. Then he took the cigar from

his mouth, waved it threateningly in Carter's face.

"I never knew it to fail," he rumbled. "Every time I wanna go some place, some damn fool thing comes up that wrecks my evening. I been waitin' for this fight tonight for weeks. The main bout goes on at ten—and it's nine now."

"Tell papa."

Ross made noises in his throat. "This Burgess woman calls up and says her husband didn't come home. They had a special date at six-thirty—anniversary or something. The Commissioner's a friend of theirs. She called him. And I'm elected. That's what I get for bein' attached to his office."

"HELL," said Carter, "and I chase after you, thinking you got something hot. Still"—his tone brightened—"this bathhouse business may make a story yet."

"Yeah. I'll be on it all night now. They called the station just after I'd left. They found all Burgess' clothes in his locker at the bathhouse. Some attendant was checking up. Probably drowned.

"They're looking for him now. It's a fire department job but I called the Commissioner and he says I gotta stick around till they find him." Ross lapsed into silence.

The flood lights were on when they reached the beach. A trace of fog made translucent by the glare, hung over the smooth water, floated along in the air like gray smoke. A dozen rowboats, like gray silhouettes against the dark oily background of the water, moved slowly as the grappling irons were manipulated. Back on the road, a large sedan and a red fire truck stood guard.

Ross moved immediately to the U shaped, one story, wooden building that fronted the beach. Clumping across the narrow porch, he stepped inside. A long counter ran along the width of the building and behind this, vaguely outlined by two dim bulbs, stood a husky young man with a deeply tanned face.

"You the fellow that found the clothes?" asked Ross.

"Yeah." The youth got to his feet and leaned over the counter.

"How'd you know about it?"

"Well, we always check the keys over before we close. Number eighty-four was missing, so I opened the room. This guy's clothes were still hanging there. I went out to look around the beach—couldn't find him, so I looked in his coat to find who he was. Then I called the police, and his house."

"Where are the clothes?"

"Still in the bathhouse. I didn't bother 'em—except to look in the coat."

"Let's have a look."

Ross followed the attendant down a narrow, dimly-lighted corridor, flanked by thinly-boarded dressing rooms. Carter tagged at his heels. An overhead light directly opposite room eighty-four threw the narrow cubicle into sharp relief as Ross opened the door and stepped inside.

ON the floor, under a tiny bench, was a pair of shoes, the socks tucked inside. On the wall were two hooks. From one of these he lifted a coat, a vest, a white shirt and a tie. Examining these thoughtfully, he replaced them. He looked at the other hook, lifted the trousers to look at the underwear beneath.

He removed the coat and vest once more. Taking the shirt to a spot in the corridor directly under the light, he studied the cloth, let his hand slip down the sleeve to the buttoned cuff. For seconds he kept his eyes on the shirt as his jaws massaged the cigar butt. Then, gathering all the clothes, he left the room and walked back to the counter.

Asking for a piece of paper, he

wrapped all the clothing except the shirt.

This he folded and stuck in his coat pocket.

"I suppose the bathing suit is missing?" he said when he finished.

"Probably." The attendant seemed startled by the question. "I hadn't thought about that—hadn't counted 'em yet."

"Count 'em now. I'll wait." Ross leaned on the counter.

FIVE minutes later the attendant said, "One missing."

"Do you lose many? Have you any way of keeping people from walking off with 'em?"

"No. We tell 'em to leave 'em in the dressing room. We don't lose many. Our name is plastered across the front—that generally stops people from taking 'em."

"Okay. Now where can I get you if I want you again tonight?"

Ross took down the address the attendant gave, picked up his bundle and went outside. Walking over to the parked sedan, he looked through a lowered rear window.

A woman sat alone on the back seat. She was small, slim, young looking, but the dark eyes, filmed with tears, stared out of a face pinched with worry, white in the reflected glare of the flood lights.

Ross introduced himself, removed the hat from his head, the cigar from his mouth.

"Did you try to get in touch with anyone from the office when Mr. Burgess didn't return?" he asked.

"Yes. I—I called his office, but they had all gone home." She hesitated and for a moment it seemed as though she would give way to the tremendous strain which besieged her. Then, with an obvious effort, she continued in a low voice:

"I knew the telephone operator, so I called her at her home. I called Mr. Kline, his partner. Neither knew where he was—they said they thought he had gone for a swim."

Ross took down the addresses of these two. "Did he come down here often?"

"No. I think he came only once or twice a summer—he thought it was such a lark to go in with the crowds—said it was such a contrast to our own beach on the North Shore." She covered her face with her hands and Ross said:

"Why don't you go home, Mrs. Burgess? There's nothing you can do here and—"

"Oh—but I couldn't. I couldn't. I've got to find out—to know if—" her voice trailed off in a sob.

Ross turned away, stepped towards the taxi. He tossed the bundle of clothes on the floor and climbed in.

"It's tough on the woman," he said, as Carter joined him, "a thing like this. Just sitting there waiting."

HE cleared his throat, and as though ashamed of this expression of his feelings, continued in a sharp tone:

"I'm gonna call up this operator. Then we'll go see Kline."

"What is it, a game?" asked Carter. "I thought you were supposed to stick around at the beach."

"Yeah? Well, get this. I've been waiting a month to see this Burke-O'Brien bout. They've spoiled it for me. I'm gonna spoil the evening for somebody else. Before I get through, I'll have the Commissioner out."

"For a drowning?"

"Burgess wasn't drowned—he was murdered."

Carter sucked in his breath, held it, then whistled softly. "So that's why you were so interested in the way his clothes were hung up? I had an idea you weren't satisfied?"

"What d'ya mean—you had an idea? When?"

"I mean, when a fellow undresses,

he generally takes off his coat first. That would be on the hook first. His vest on top of that, then his shirt. On the other hook would be his jeans, then his underwear. Burgess' stuff was just reversed. It looked as if he'd either dumped them all on the floor and then hung 'em up, or else — somebody put 'em there."

"Smart boy."

"Tell it to the City Editor, will you?" Carter grinned and hunched forward on the seat. "Now gimme the needle on that shirt—what about it?"

"Later—if I'm right." Ross' jaws clamped down on the cigar and he wedged his big body in one corner of the seat.

THEY stopped at a public phone on the way uptown, then continued to Kline's apartment. Ross was telling of the telephone conversation he'd had with the operator at Burgess' office.

"His wife had it right. He went out about two with Kline, told the operator he was going swimming. Kline was going to play golf. And there's something else."

Ross lit his cigar. "A fellow by the name of Alpert—a customer—threatened Burgess this morning. Y'know, Burgess & Kline are brokers. Maybe Burgess was going to sell Alpert out if he didn't put up more margin. Anyway, Alpert raised hell. The operator heard him raving—maybe Kline can tell us more."

Ross puffed on his cigar. It had gone out again, but he didn't seem to notice it.

They found Alfred Kline in his modest apartment on Commonwealth Avenue. He was a slender, dark-haired man with a pink, smooth-shaven face. Although he was evidently not expecting callers, his manner was cordial and he smiled as he stood in the doorway. But the smile vanished from his face as Ross introduced himself.

"Is there something wrong?" he asked anxiously.

"Yeah. They're dragging for your partner's body off L Street."

"What? They're — you mean—" Kline stepped back into the room and his eyes widened.

"Yeah." Ross' eyes caught Kline's, held them. "They're afraid he's drowned. Found his clothes in the dressing room."

"Oh!" Kline twisted his hands together. "Come in."

Ross and Carter entered the room, stopped just inside the door. Kline walked to the window, turned and came back to a walnut cabinet. As he lifted the top a tray came into view with several bottles and glasses. Pouring a glass half full, he gulped the contents.

"I hope you'll excuse me." He came back to the center of the room and dropped into a chair. "It does not seem possible. Mrs. Burgess called me about eight. I hadn't heard anything since. Is—is there anything I can do?"

"Not now. They have not found the body yet. The operator at your office said you both went out together."

"THAT'S right. I went to play golf. Burgess said he was going to sneak in a swim—wanted me to go with him. It didn't appeal to me. It's a public beach, you know—" Kline shrugged deprecatingly, "I couldn't see it."

"And how about this fellow Alpert?" Ross surveyed the end of his cigar, put it back in his mouth and lit it. "The phone girl says he had trouble with Burgess."

"Yes — yes —" Kline stammered. "He did. Alpert's account was on the ragged edge. We couldn't carry him any longer. Burgess told him so."

"And Alpert threatened him?"

"Well, in a way."

"What, exactly, did he say?"

"He said if Burgess closed him out it would be the last account he ever closed out." Kline gestured impatiently.

"But, naturally, he was excited—all upset. I don't believe he meant anything by it."

"Sure. I know. But give me his address. Then let me use your phone and I'll clear out."

ROSS jotted down the address, and put in his call.

"Hello, Harry?" he said a moment later. "Pick up Sam Alpert, Audubon Road. Take him down for questioning, hold him till I get there or call you."

"But, say—" stammered Kline as Ross finished. "There isn't anything wrong, is there? I mean, if Burgess did drown—"

"Just want to get all the details—find out where Alpert was this afternoon. By the way, where do you play golf?"

Kline flushed under the implication, then grinned wryly. "Elmwood. I think you'll find I was there all right."

Ross grunted. "I know I will. And stick around here a while, will yuh? We may want you to identify the body."

Back in the taxi again, Ross looked at his watch. "Five after ten,' he said. "I got a good notion to take a look at the fight."

"But you won't," Carter chuckled.

"What d'ya mean?"

"You ain't fooling anybody, so don't try to kid me. I been out with you before. They couldn't drag you off'n this thing now. You got something hot. And papa's going to stick right with you till it breaks."

Ross snorted. He puffed on the cigar, trying to coax it back to life again, although it had gone out almost as soon as he lighted it. Then he grunted.

"Smart, ain't yuh?"

"That's twice you said that tonight. I'll believe you if you're not careful."

"You would."

The driver said, "Where to, boss?"

"Huh," Ross looked up. "Oh—the Morgue."

Pat Donnely was in charge at the Morgue. An old time cop, pensioned off to service here, he was a big bodied, gray haired man whose feet had surrendered to the inevitable. He was reading a magazine in the little office where a single blob of yellow light fought an uneven battle with its environment, and he seemed glad of the company when Ross and Carter entered.

"Hi! What's up?" he said.

"Who've yuh got down here now?" asked Ross, tossing his bundle of clothing on the desk. "Any come in today?"

"Two. One early this morning—"

"Let's see the other one."

Donnely got up from his chair, led the way down a narrow corridor to a room at the end. Opening the door, he snapped on the light. Ross went in, with Carter at his heels.

He strode over to the still, sheet covered form on the table and uncovered the face. His lips tightened momentarily and his eyes narrowed at the sight. The face, severely battered, was almost unrecognizable; there was a bullet hole in the forehead.

ALTHOUGH it was difficult to identify the man's features, it was evident that he was a heavy-set, thick-necked fellow of about forty. Ross replaced the sheet and turned to Donnely.

"Bring in his clothes, will you?"

Donnely shuffled in a minute later with them over his arm. He placed a pair of worn low shoes on the

floor. Draped the rest of the apparel over a chair, put the hat on top. Ross stepped over to examine them.

He searched the trousers of the threadbare suit and discarded them. He merely glanced at the blood-stained coat, but he looked for a long time at the sweat stained felt hat. There was no identifying mark on the sweatband and he turned to Carter.

"Put it on!"

"Who—me?" Carter's eyes widened. He grimaced and finally took off his own and gingerly set the other on his head.

"Fits pretty good, don't it?"

CARTER shrugged silently and took off the hat. Ross looked at the shoes for some time. He stepped over to the body, lifted the bottom of the sheet and looked at the bluish feet.

"Say!" Carter's tone was excited. "Those shoes look small for that guy."

"Yeah." Ross turned back to the chair and picked up the underwear.

"And that's new," added Carter.

"Yeah." Ross picked up the shirt, took it to a spot under the lone light and carefully inspected the cloth and the blood stained collar and front. He replaced it and turned again to Donnely.

"Did you undress him?"

"Yeah."

"The clothes must've been pretty tight, weren't they?"

"They were. Looked like hand-me downs. The feet were all pinched up in the shoes, poor fellow. I don't see how he could walk in 'em."

"And the hat wasn't on his head either."

"It was not."

"When'd they bring him in?"

"Hardly an hour ago."

"Who's working on it?" Ross started for the door.

"Detective Daley."

"Okay, Donnely. Leave the clothes there. I'll want 'em again."

Back in the little office Ross picked up the phone and called Headquarters. "Get hold of Daley and Brown. Send 'em down to the Morgue right away."

Carter hopped around the desk as Ross hung up. His hat was pushed way back on his head and his blue eyes blinked their interest.

"Hey! Let me in on it. Is this guy in there Burgess?"

"How do I know?" Ross regarded the blackened end of his cigar. "I never saw him before. I gotta wait till somebody identifies him."

"Then why don't you get Kline down here an' find out?"

"Not a bad idea. Maybe I will after I talk to Daley."

Carter spat out an oath, mumbled something unintelligible and reached for the phone.

"Hello, Charlie?" he said when he had the number. "This is Tom. I'm down at the Morgue. Send a boy up to the morgue—our morgue, I mean. Get everything he can find on James Burgess. See what you got for pictures. Look up his family. Look up Alfred Kline, his partner. See if you got anything on Sam Alpert on Audubon Road."

Carter stopped to get his breath. "What? Sure, I know they're grappling for him at the beach. This is something else. Yeah, I know we're running a daily—nerts to you."

FIVE minutes later Daley and Brown walked into the office. Ross motioned Brown to one side and gave his attention to the red-faced, bushy browed man with him.

"What've yuh got on this guy in here, Daley?" He jerked the cigar over his shoulder.

"Not much. Picked him up around nine. A Park cop found him up by the reservoir."

"The clothes don't go with the body."

"I know," grumbled Daley. "They didn't fit him good—were too small. But what the hell?" Daley shrugged. "If he was a bum, he couldn't be fussy."

"NO—not about his clothes. But he would be about shoes."

"Suppose he couldn't get the size he wanted?" Daley's tone was sarcastic.

"Then he'd cut slits in 'em—so he could walk."

"Well—" Daley's lip curled. "I don't think he was a bum anyway. It looks like somebody bumped him someplace else, dressed him up in clothes that couldn't be traced, and dumped him out in the park."

"That's more like it." Ross' eyes held Daley's until the detective dropped them, then he continued: "How long'd the Examiner say he'd been dead? How long was he in the park?"

"He was knocked off about two or three this afternoon. He was dumped out between eight and nine. The cop who found him said he wasn't there when he went by at eight. But say—" Daley's manner became slightly belligerent. "Am I working on this, or what?"

"So what?" Ross grinned, then scowled. "Go ahead, do your stuff. I'm workin' on somethin' else."

Daley started to answer, checked himself, spun about and walked out. Ross stepped over to Detective Brown. He talked to him for a couple of minutes in a low tone, then Brown went out. Ross came back to the desk, picked up the phone and got Kline's apartment.

"Can you come down to the Morgue?" he asked. "Yeah, the Morgue. I don't want to bother Mrs. Burgess if I can help it, and somebody's got to identify the body."

He hung up, scowled. He chewed vigorously on his cigar with apparent relish. A broad grin replaced the scowl and he winked at Carter. Lifting the receiver again, he put in a call.

"Hello," he said finally. "Commissioner? This is Ross. I'm down at the Morgue. Better come down right away. I think we got Burgess here. —No—they didn't find him at the beach. But you know him — can identify him."

There was a pause while Ross listened to the voice at the other end of the wire. He looked at Carter again and winked. Then he said:

"I think you'd better come down—we got a new angle you ought to know about. Okay."

Ross hung up. "He will spoil my evenings, will he?" he muttered, half to himself. Then the phone rang, interrupting further thoughts. He picked it up.

"Hello! Yeah, this is Ross. Oh—you got him, eh? Good. Send someone down with him—right away."

HE pronged the receiver and whirled around in the chair. "Now we'll see what Alpert was doing this afternoon."

When the plainclothes man came in twenty minutes later, it was evident he had a very frightened man with him. Alpert walked with quick, jerky steps. His mustache looked jet black against the tallow colored skin and his dark eyes swiveled fearfully as they sought the corners of the room.

"What's the idea of getting me down here," he said, trying to be brusque. "Where were you this afternoon?" countered Ross.

Alpert gulped. "Why—I—what do you mean?"

"I mean—where were you—after two o'clock?"

"I — in the lobby of the Hotel Charles."

"You must have had plenty of

company. Who was with you?"

"No one. I went alone. I wanted to think—I had a lot on my mind and—"

"I'll say you did." Ross continued his questioning. Found that Alpert had no witnesses. He accused him of threatening Burgess.

"I know I threatened Burgess," he admitted. "I was desperate—but what's happened? Is anything wrong? Why are you holding me?"

"Burgess is dead—murdered."

A CHOKING sob rose in Alpert's throat. His face went white and he swayed drunkenly, seemed about to collapse. Ross motioned the plainclothes man to lead him to a chair. Then Kline came in.

His eyes flicked across the faces in the room, rested on Alpert. He stood uncertainly until Ross said:

"Sit down, Kline. The Commissioner's coming down. We'll wait for him."

Ross took out a match, rubbed the stem of it against the burned end of the cigar. When he had cleaned it of the ash, he lit it and puffed contentedly. Carter sat on one end of the desk, his eyes drifting from Ross to Kline to Alpert. Donnely and the plainclothes man stood motionless by the door. An antiquated wall clock ticked its monotonous message. There was no other sound.

It was nearly fifteen minutes later that Commissioner Lynn stalked into the room.

His entrance broke the tension and from at least one throat came an audible sigh of relief.

Lynn was a tall, sharp-featured, distinguished looking man and the glaring white of his shirt-front, the trimness of his dinner clothes seemed strangely out of place in the sordid surroundings. That his temper was on edge was at once apparent.

"Well, Ross," he snapped impatiently, "what is it you want? What's this story about identifying Burgess. They tell me at Headquarters they're still grappling for his body. If you have got me down here on some wild goose chase—" the sentence ended in a growl.

Ross took the cigar stub from his mouth, looked regretfully at it for a moment, then tossed it into a battered cuspidor. He introduced Lynn to Kline, then said:

"We'd like to look at the body again, Donnely."

They all trouped down the narrow corridor, waited while Donnely snapped on the light, then entered the room. Ross waited until they were grouped around the table, then lifted the sheet.

There was a sharp, whistling sound as the spectators sucked in their breaths, then a moment of dead silence.

"God!" said Lynn. "That face—smashed—I don't know. It looks like Burgess, but—" his voice trailed off.

"How about it, Kline?" rapped Ross.

"I don't know. There's something about the shape of the head—"

"And you, Alpert," Ross's voice was harsh. "Is this the man you threatened?"

ALPERT covered his face with his hands.

He moaned, turned away. Lynn pulled the sheet down farther, lifted the right hand.

"It's Jim," he said in a voice flat with finality and resignation. "That mole on his wrist."

"Yes." Kline's agreement was almost a whisper.

"I don't understand." Lynn seemed to be talking to himself. "His clothes were in the bathhouse—" His voice sharpened. "Let's get out of here." As he turned towards the door, Ross gathered up the clothing on the chair and followed.

Back in the office Ross placed the garments on the desk.

"Is this the kind of clothes Burgess wore?"

Lynn took one look. "Of course not," he snapped. He glared at Ross. "You know something. What is it?" Then, as the sergeant hesitated, "Come on, man, out with it."

"Burgess was murdered," Ross began, "probably after a quarrel. Anyway, it wasn't premeditated, or it'd never have been done this way. Because after the murder, the killer had a body on his hands."

ROSS started pacing the room, his eyes drifting over the occupants.

"Then the guy got a bright idea. He'd smash Burgess' face, dress him up like a bum. The body wouldn't be identified, would go to Potter's Field. That took care of that end. But there was another angle just as important—an explanation of Burgess' disappearance, so nobody'd be nosin' around and maybe find out the bum was Burgess.

"So the killer took Burgess' clothes, wrapped 'em up and took 'em down to the bathhouse. He hung 'em up, locked 'em up, took the bathing suit, he'd got at the counter and beat it. He knew when they found the clothes it'd look like Burgess drowned—only they'd never find the body.

"Simple, eh?" Ross faced the Commissioner, "and a mighty sweet idea."

"But how did—" Lynn stammered.

Ross waved for silence, but before he could speak the phone rang. He stepped over, lifted the receiver and listened for a minute or so. Then he said, "Okay, Brown," and hung up. "The killer," he began again, "had one problem. He was in a jam for shirts. He could put some of his own clothes that wouldn't be traced, on Burgess. But shirts and underwear—no Laundry marks would give the show away. And he couldn't leave Burgess' own shirt on the body—it could be traced. He couldn't take it to the bathhouse—it had blood on it.

"So he had to go out and buy two new ones and get rid of the old shirt along with the gun, the bathhouse key and the bathing suit. He left the body, clothed in some of his old garments, right where it was in his apartment. He came back after dark, got the body and dumped it in the park."

He turned to Kline. "Did you put the shirt on before you smashed his face?" he asked softly and lifted the blood-stained garment from the desk. He took the other shirt from his pocket and tossed it down beside the other. Kline started as though struck. "What do you mean," he snapped. "Are you insinuating that—"

"Yes, Ross," said the Commissioner, coloring with some irritation. "If you've got facts let's have them. If not—"

"JUST a minute." Ross scowled and his eyes narrowed. "Burgess was murdered. His clothing was found in the bathhouse. How did it get there?"

"Why—I suppose the killer took it there," said Lynn.

"Exactly. But who, besides the telephone operator and Kline, knew Burgess was going to the beach? Alpert didn't. He left the office at eleven o'clock." Ross turned on Kline and continued rapidly.

"You got rid of the key, the gun and the shirt. But you didn't get rid of the bathing suit. Brown found it in your locker at the golf club—where you went after you left the beach.

"And," Ross added meaningly, "Brown also found the sales slip that came with the two shirts and underwear you bought. It was in the waste basket in your apartment.

Didn't think it important, eh, Kline? What was the trouble? Holding out on your partner? Was that why he came to your apartment instead of going to the beach?"

Kline started for the door. At the sight of Donnely and the plain-clothes man he stopped, whirled and stood shaking like an animal at bay.

"I shot in self defense," he shouted hysterically. "He wouldn't listen to reason. He—"

"That's something for the jury to decide." Ross motioned to the plain-clothes man. "Take him along."

COMMISSIONER LYNN paced back and forth across the room, his hands behind his back. Carter was hunched over the phone, talking rapidly. Ross sat in front of the desk, calmly regarding the end of a fresh cigar.

"When I got in the dressing room," he said slowly, "I knew something was wrong. The clothes were not hung up like they should be. Carter saw that too. But it was the shirt that was important. It was new—had the pinholes still in it. And the cuffs were buttoned, just the way it came from the store."

"But—" Lynn ceased his pacing.

"*Nobody stops to button his cuffs after he takes his shirt off*—not when he has to unbutton 'em again to get it on. I smelled something fishy then, and it didn't come from the ocean. I was pretty sure the shirt had never been worn. As long as my evening was spoiled, I decided to see if I couldn't make somebody pay for it."

"WHAT do you mean, your evening was spoiled?"

Ross judiciously ignored the question. "I knew then, they'd never find Burgess in the ocean, and I had an idea he might turn up in the Morgue. I found out from the operator that Kline was the only one who knew he was coming to the beach. I checked up on Alpert too, but when I found out when he left the office, I knew he didn't do it.

"When I saw the body in here, I knew I had it. The clothing, shoes and hat were too small—but it was the shirt that did it. New—the same markings on the collar—bought from the same store. One on Burgess, one in the bathhouse—" Ross shrugged. "There was only one answer. I got Kline down here so Brown could search the apartment. Like all murders, there was a slip to his plan—and Brown found it—a sales slip.

"Kline did a good job with the killing. The underwear was incidental, but he had to buy the shirts. Even at that—if he'd unbuttoned the cuffs, so it would look like a man had worn that one in the bathhouse, I think he'd been clear. I know I wouldn't have gone any farther."

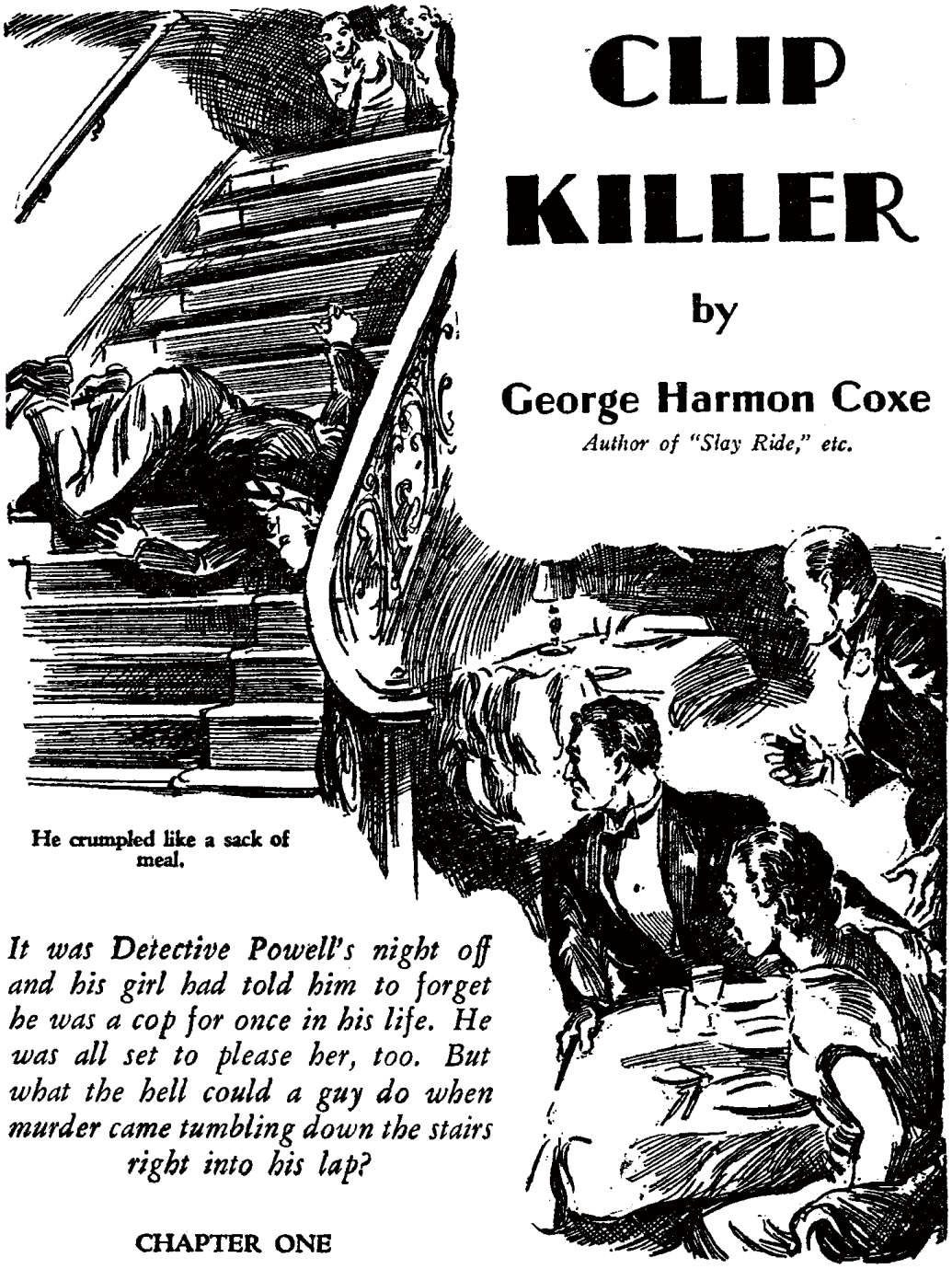
Ross stopped and his brow wrinkled in thought. "I wonder," he said suddenly, "how the fight came out." He nudged Carter who was still going strong on the phone. "Hey. Ask him who won the fight."

CLIP KILLER

by

George Harmon Coxe

Author of "Slay Ride," etc.



He crumpled like a sack of meal.

It was Detective Powell's night off and his girl had told him to forget he was a cop for once in his life. He was all set to please her, too. But what the hell could a guy do when murder came tumbling down the stairs right into his lap?

CHAPTER ONE

Off Night

LOUIS KRESSER, the headwaiter, came over to Powell's table and said: "Good evening. Glad to see you here—er—unofficially."

First Grade Detective Dan Powell, looking as much unlike a detective as he could, glanced up, said, "Yeah," and went back to his sandwich.

He didn't like Kresser. There was something in the plump, bald man's suave manner that made him appear to be continually bowing and scraping even though he stood motionless, the spare menus held deferentially across his chest.

Kresser smiled. "I hope everything is all right."

Powell continued to eat. Janet Connors said: "Splendid."

Powell stole a glance at the girl across the little table. She was just the type a big, easy-going man would pick—small, dark-haired, with clear blue eyes and a firm mouth and chin that spoke of a capable, slightly aggressive personality.

Powell felt uncomfortable under the girl's gaze. He was at a disadvantage under these conditions and he knew it. His thick chest bulged the gleaming stiff shirt-front against the smooth, satin lapels of his tuxedo. His bow tie was slightly askew; his hair was neatly combed, but it was shaggy and needed trimming.

His face was a weathered brown and his dark eyes, deep-set beside a nose that had been broken and improperly set, were fixed on his plate. He wished to hell Kresser would haul out and leave him alone.

The headwaiter said: "I wondered—I don't want to interrupt—but we have a party in one of our private dining rooms that seems to be getting out of control. If it gets any worse perhaps you will—" He broke off under the steady gaze of the girl and the sentence remained unfinished.

Powell started to speak, caught a glimpse of Janet Connors' expression. She was looking directly at him and her eyes said: "This is our night off, and don't forget it."

He looked up at Kresser, said: "On your way. This is just like you said—unofficial."

THE headwaiter bowed and withdrew. Powell turned in his chair and followed him with his eyes; watched him circle the small dance floor, crowded by guests moving to the seductive rhythm of the twelve-piece orchestra, and climb the wide staircase to the mezzanine with its half dozen tables; saw him disappear down the hall that led to the four private dining rooms and Sam Werner's office.

Janet Connors said: "You didn't have to be so crude about it."

Powell tasted his coffee. "Can I help it if I don't like him? I didn't want to come here anyway."

"I don't see why not. The food is good and they have—"

"You don't know the mug that runs it. He's—"

"Don't say mug."

"—a louse," continued Powell, ignoring the interruption. "Sam Werner's been running clip joints for years. Maybe he's still got a couple. As fast as we close one he opens another."

"Clip joints?" Janet Connors' smooth skin puckered over the bridge of her nose. "I've read something about them, but I thought that Repeal—"

"Repeal nothing. Clip joints are just the same. A guy goes in, lets a coupla broads kid him along while he buys two or three drinks, and gets a bill for a hundred and thirty-seven bucks shoved under his nose. When he squawks—if he does—the bouncers go to work on him. Sometimes they get him to sign a check; sometimes they stick with him till morning so they can be sure to cash it."

"But"—Janet Connors' blue eyes widened— "I don't see— Why doesn't the man have them arrested?"

Powell snorted disdainfully. "Because nine out of ten are from out of town; butter'n egg men; married. If they squawk they're suckers. Most of 'em would rather pay up and keep still about it."

Powell forgot his surroundings and Louis Kresser as he warmed up to his subject. He chuckled, said: "There was one guy about a month ago that was a honey. He was a college fellow; from Harvard or Cornell or someplace. Played football—or maybe it was crew. Any-

way, he went in one of these spots and when they gave him the bad news he argued.

"He fought his way out and came running to the precinct house. I happened to be there. He was kinda messy. His lips were split; his nose was all blood and one eye was closed. But he went back with us and we got there before they could close up."

Powell laughed at the thought. "All three bouncers had knuckle marks on their pans. And you should see this lad go to work with us. When we got through there wasn't a—"

Janet Connors sniffed. "I think it's disgusting."

Powell's face sobered. He said, weakly: "Well, from now on these college boys are aces with me."

"Anyway"—the girl dismissed the subject with a wave of her hand—"they have the best music in town here, no matter who owns it. Let's dance the rest of this one."

Powell started to shove back his chair. He heard the girl gasp and his eyes flicked up to see her startled face. Then a woman screamed above the muted notes of the orchestra. Other women joined her. A peculiar thudding sound reached him. He turned quickly.

THE man was already halfway down the stairs. He was falling, limp and boneless, like a sack of meal, bouncing, sliding downward. At the top of the stairs a man and two women watched in frightened rigidity as the fellow hit the floor on his shoulders, turned over once from the momentum and lay still.

The orchestra blared vigorously, the brass rose in an ear-splitting crescendo. Men jumped up from tables in all parts of the room; dancing stopped.

Powell stood up, a soft curse on his lips. Janet Connors said, "Wait, Dan. You don't have to—" but he ignored her and began picking his way past the tables that intervened.

The man lay on his back. There was a bruise on his forehead and his eyes were closed. He was mumbling meaningless words in a thick, indistinct voice.

He was, Powell thought, about thirty-five and he wore a plain, dark business suit in place of evening clothes. The suit was mussed; the shirt was torn and the tie was clumsily knotted. His companion, a small, thin-faced man, obviously drunk, had hurried down the stairs and was trying to get him to his feet.

Kresser pushed through the crowd as Powell dropped to one knee beside the fellow. He said: "Let's get him out of here."

Powell said: "Wait a minute." He saw that the man was alive, that aside from the bruise on his forehead and a spot of blood on the shirt collar, there appeared to be nothing wrong with him.

Kresser spoke impatiently. "Come on. He's passed out cold. We can't put on a show here."

Powell helped Kresser get the man to his feet. Together they guided his stumbling feet toward the coat room in the foyer. The headwaiter turned to the crowd, said: "Please go on with your dancing. He's all right."

In the foyer, a dimly lighted cubicle, curtained off by thick, dark velvet hangings, the music of the main room seemed far away. They propped the man up in front of the coat-room counter and Kresser spoke indignantly.

"I wish to hell people would get wise to themselves. They haven't got used to Repeal yet; seem to think they've only got a little while to get tight in."

Powell, his face a dark bronze in the half-light, looked at the half-conscious man and felt sorry for him. He thought about Janet Connors, and wondered if

this fellow had a wife, wondered if he would have to go home to her in this condition.

He turned to the thin-faced companion, then noticed the two women who stood behind him. They looked at him anxiously and waited.

He saw that one woman was a peroxide blond on the wrong side of thirty. Even in the diffused light he could see the depth of her make-up, the coarseness of her features. The other woman was different. Hardly more than a girl, she was slender, brown-haired. Her complexion was clear and her eyes seemed genuinely frightened.

He said: "This guy's had enough trouble. Call a taxi, Kresser, and let 'em take him home."

"Nothing doing!"

Powell spun about at the firm, smooth-voiced announcement, stared at the heavy-set, aggressive-looking man who had come up behind him. He took a cigar from a thick mouth and the dim, overhead light danced from small black eyes.

Sam Werner said: "They got a thirty-dollar bill and there's been some breakage. This guy"—he jerked the cigar towards the thin-faced man—"says he hasn't got the dough to pay. Take 'em down to the station. They can pay when they sober up or I'll swear out a warrant."

POWELL felt a slow anger churn within him. Even in a place like the Club Altrazar Werner used his clip-joint tactics. For a moment he thought of telling him where he could go and what he could do. But he finally decided that even if it was his night off, it would be better to call up the precinct house.

He made his telephone call and came back to the foyer. Werner had gone, and he tried to get the names and addresses from the thin-faced man. But this fellow had gone into a decline. He dozed with his elbows hooked over the coat-room counter and his words were unintelligible.

Powell gave it up and turned to the two women. The plump blonde answered him. "Elsie Dubois," she said coldly. "Six seventy-nine Stacey Street." She hesitated while Powell jotted this down on a card, said: "This is Blanche Avery. She lives with me."

Powell said: "Who're these two guys?"

Elsie Dubois shrugged. "Just a couple of heels."

"Yeah?" said Powell sardonically. "What're their names?"

"Don't ask me. They picked us up in the lobby of the Biltmere"—her lip curled—"and it oughta be a lesson to us."

Powell looked at the contemptuous blonde, was tempted to book her also. Then he saw the frightened whiteness of the other girl and weakened. He said: "O. K. Run along."

"Come on, Blanche." The blonde hunched her fur collar around her ears with a haughty gesture and flounced toward the door.

Blanche Avery gave Powell a grateful, frightened look and followed.

Powell wondered about that girl. Why the fear in her eyes? She had nothing to worry about now. He shrugged and turned to the drunk Kresser still supported. Probably the kid wasn't used to such scenes and the reaction to sober reality scared her.

With the help of the hat-check girl he got the men's coats and hats by the time two uniformed policemen entered the foyer. He gave a brief picture of what had happened, said: "Book 'em as drunk and disorderly. Werner'll be down in the morning."

Janet Connors' eyes were cold and distant when he returned to his table, and he realized he had been gone nearly a half hour. After a first glance at her he kept his eyes averted. He took a sip of coffee.

It was cold. To hide his guilty feeling he said: "Want to dance now?"

The girl said: "Always a cop." Then, "No. Now that my evening is ruined I might as well go home."

CHAPTER TWO

Morning After

POWELL scowled in the mirror as he finished shaving at seven fifteen the next morning. The evening that he and Janet had looked forward to, that started so auspiciously, had been a flop.

In a way he did not blame her. They'd had dinner at the Baker House, seen a good musical comedy, then gone to the Club Altrazar. He hadn't wanted to go to the Altrazar. There were other places and he had said so. It had been a mistake to argue about it. He should've kept his mouth shut.

But women were funny. Then those two drunks. Maybe he should have sat tight at his table. But a first-grade detective who stood Number Three on the sergeant's list had certain obligations, even on his night off. If there had been any serious trouble he would have looked pretty funny.

The shrill tones of the telephone checked his thoughts. He patted some shaving lotion on his face, went into the bedroom and picked the telephone from the bedside table.

The voice in the receiver was Captain Tuttle's. He said: "You'd better get down here right away. That guy's dead."

"What guy?"

"What guy? Why the guy you sent down from Werner's place. The tall guy. They brought him down in the wagon and booked him like you said—drunk and disorderly. They found him on the floor about an hour ago; he died in the night."

Dead? Powell got a quick sinking sensation in the pit of his stomach. Was it his fault? Should he have—

"They thought it was acute alcoholism" —Powell caught his breath in relief— "but the M. E. says he died from a concussion and a fractured skull."

Powell listened in sudden weariness until the captain finished and hung up. He dressed and hurried to headquarters.

Captain Tuttle, head of the detective division, a big-bodied, grizzled veteran with a bushy mustache, motioned Powell to a chair. "Now just what the hell happened last night?"

Powell told his story briefly, but his mind was busy with jumbled thoughts and questions that had no answers. He told of everything except the first trip Kresser had made to his table to tell of the rowdy party that was taking place in that private dining room.

His thoughts hung there for a while. Should he have gone upstairs and stuck his nose in on a private party like that? If Kresser wanted a cop why hadn't he gone out and got the guy on the beat? The drunk might've fallen downstairs anyway. Tuttle was talking.

"In a way I don't blame you much. You weren't on duty. But it don't sound so good. Wasn't he marked up?"

"He had a bump on his forehead. There was a little blood on his collar. But he looked like he'd passed out, was mumbling to himself like any souse."

Tuttle drummed thick fingers on the desk top and scowled. "You got a good record. Ordinarily there wouldn't be anything to it, cause the M. E. ain't sure he could've saved the fella if he'd been sent right to Emergency."

Tuttle sucked his lips. "But a month ago some cop from Station Sixteen picked up a drunk and booked him just like this one. The guy had a bullet in his head—a little twenty-five—and you couldn't see

any blood. The newspapers gave us the razz."

Tuttle spread his hands palms up. "And they got wind of this one already."

Powell said, "Oh," bitterly.

Tuttle said: "Yeah. They'll have the story on the streets by ten thirty—and it'll probably stink."

Powell sat up in his chair as a sudden thought gripped him. "You don't think those two cops worked him over any?"

The captain shook his head. "They say they didn't touch him. I think they're tellin' the truth. They should've looked him over, but you're the one that told them to book those drunks.

"But hell!" grunted Powell. "That guy fell down easy-like; and the stairs were carpeted. I don't see how—"

Tuttle spoke slowly. "He's dead, ain't he?"

He hesitated. "Maybe it'll blow over. I hope so. But if the papers holler enough it'll look like the whole department's to blame. I haven't heard from the commissioner yet, but he'll be plenty hot. He may not blame you, but if there's any loose ends you'd better start to check up if you want to stay in good standing."

Powell slouched against the cushions of the taxicab as it sped downtown to the Club Atrazar, and cursed his luck. He had just come from the address the blonde had given him the night before, had found that Six Seventy-nine Stacey Street was a garage sandwiched in between two old apartment buildings.

He was disappointed but not greatly surprised in not finding the two women. That blonde looked as if she'd been around. And why should she give her right address?

He tried to face the situation sanely. His earlier bitterness was more subdued now. After all, it was just one of those things. He could try to round up as much information as possible and face the commissioner with all the facts.

He had been on the force for seven years, long enough to know that you had to take the breaks as they came—the good with the bad. This was a tough one, but he could take it; at least he hoped he could, without squawking.

He might have heeded Kresser's first appeal; he might have taken Janet Connors' advice and kept out of it entirely. On the other hand, he might have ridden to the precinct house with the two drunks. Even then he probably would not have examined that fellow. Those stairs did not look dangerous. The bruise, that bit of blood. Most drunks were banged up a bit anyway.

It might have helped if he'd held the two dames. He would have too, if it had not been for that one, the young one with the frightened look. Some subconscious thought made him wonder about that look even now, as the taxi rolled through the kaleidoscopic, noise-filled canyons of the business section. She was scared all right. But if he had been hard-boiled, like he should have been—

"Just a big-hearted slob," he muttered softly. Then, as the taxi pulled up at the awninged entrance of the Club Altrazar he added: "And it would happen on my night off."

He told the driver to wait and went inside.

The place which had been so gay the previous night had a funereal air about it now. The little foyer was deserted and dark. From beyond came the sound of a piano and a girl singing.

He went into the main dining room. On the dais-like orchestra platform a slumped figure played the piano while a fur-coated girl rehearsed a song. A single waiter sat at a table and watched.

Powell walked across the dance floor and asked the waiter where Kresser and

Werner were, when they would be around.

The waiter looked up at him lazily, said: "Kresser don't get down till afternoon—generally late. Werner'll be in most any time."

Powell said: "Tell him I want to see him. What room did that guy that fell downstairs have?"

"Last one on the right."

Powell climbed the stairs, went down a narrow, carpeted hall to the second door on the right. The room was dark and stuffy with stale, tobacco-flavored air. He turned on the light beside the door and looked about him.

The room was square, garish in its hangings and furniture. There was a davenport, two overstuffed chairs, a radio. In the center of a cheap, dark rug was a dining table and four straight-backed chairs. A spotted tablecloth still covered the table and there was an ashtray on it, filled to overflowing with cigarette butts and matches.

Powell walked around the table once, lifted the cloth and looked at the floor between the table legs. He stooped as some object caught his eye, picked up a wadded paper ball. He straightened this out, saw that it was a strip of black paper four or five inches long and perhaps three inches wide. He turned the strip over in his hand, folded it absently and thrust it in his vest pocket.

HE hadn't the slightest idea what he was looking for, if anything, and he mentally checked his findings that morning. He had talked with the two cops who had taken the drunks to the station house. They swore they had not laid a finger on the prisoners—and Powell believed them. They had noticed the blood on the man's neck—but they had not thought much about it and had booked the two as drunk and disorderly, and put them in separate cells.

He had tried to reach the M. E., but found him out. He talked with the thin-faced drunk who had corroborated the blond's story of the pick-up.

The dead man was Douglas Yates, a bond salesman with independent means. There was a wife and two children. But Yates had the reputation of being a not too particular playboy, and his actions of the night before had been duplicated in the past.

The thin-faced man was Steve Guyer. He was a liquor salesman, he said, but when pressed admitted he was out of a job. He did not know Yates very well, had met him a couple of weeks ago and run into him on the street last night. He was plenty sober when Powell talked to him.

Werner had called up to say that he would not press the charges, but Powell had fixed it so that Guyer would be held while he checked the story. Then he had started out to find the two women.

He heard the door open and turned around to face Sam Werner who gave him a sardonic glance and said: "Looks like you muffed one last night."

Powell caught Werner's small, black eyes, held them as a slow anger mounted within him. He said: "You oughta be satisfied. Yates paid plenty for your breakage."

Werner took a cigar from his vest pocket and removed the cellophane wrapper. His voice was insolent as he spoke.

"It's my fault you cops don't know enough to give a fellow medical attention, hunh?"

"It's your fault I'm on the spot. If we coulda put 'em in a cab—"

"Yeah? What difference does it make where he died? That other souse would never got him to a hospital."

Powell realized the bitter truth of the

statement. What difference did it make? According to Tuttle the M.E. had said he probably would have died anyway. "If we'd put 'em in a cab maybe the driver woulda taken the guy to the hospital," he said lamely.

Werner laughed. "You'd be a lot better off if you'd looked into it yourself, wouldn't you, Powell?"

Powell fought the slow anger that rose in his heart. He wanted to smash his fist into the complacent, almost taunting face. But that would only make matters worse.

He said: "Those two broads gave me a phony address."

Werner shrugged. "Can you blame 'em?"

"They ever been here before?" growled Powell.

"If you mean, do I know 'em," said Werner, "no."

"Then gimme a list of your waiters—of all your help. I'll see what they got to say about it."

Werner turned into the hall and stepped to the door at the far end. It led to his private office, a spacious room with an expensive-looking desk and chairs, two large filing cabinets and a safe. He opened the drawer of his desk and copied off a list of names and addresses for Powell.

The detective bought a paper when he left Werner. The story was there—on the front page. There was a picture of Yates. Powell read the lead paragraph, felt the blunt accusation of the attack on the police department, the crusading atmosphere of the story and threw the paper into the street in disgust.

CHAPTER THREE

Murder

AT eleven o'clock Powell tried the medical examiner's office again. The official was out but one of his deputies was in and the detective questioned him about concussions.

"You can't tell a thing about 'em." The doctor, a young man with dark hair and glasses offered Powell a cigarette and held a light for him. "Brain injuries are funny things." The doctor inhaled and spoke thoughtfully.

"I know a fellow that fell off a fence and cracked his head on a sidewalk. He walked around for three days, then came in and complained of a headache. He was dead an hour later."

Powell said: "But hell. This Yates looked like he'd passed out. He was mumbling to himself, and when we got him to his feet he could stagger along pretty well. I didn't think there could be much wrong with him. And there was no blood."

The doctor wet his lips, glanced at his cigarette. "I know. They're sometimes hard to diagnose. Sometimes they don't bleed at all. You're liable to go off like that"—he snapped his fingers—"or walk around for days."

Powell got back to headquarters just in time to get a telephone call from Janet Connors. She had seen the newspapers. She was nervous, contrite, a bit frightened from what she had read. It was, she said, all her fault. She should not have insisted on going to the Altrazar—she should have taken his advice and gone to a decent place—she'd be worried sick if he lost his standing on her account.

Powell lied like a gentleman. The newspaper account was exaggerated. It wasn't her fault. He was working on it now and he'd have a different story for the newspapers later on. She was not to worry. Everything would be all right.

He hung up and stared dejectedly at the telephone until Tom Hunziker, a tall, lean-faced blond man who often worked as his partner came into the room.

Hunziker said: "Tough. And those damn newspapers!"

Powell's jaws came together so that the muscles behind his cheekbones were white. He told Hunziker what he had done, gave him a description of the two women, and the list he'd got from Werner, said: "Check up on these names for me, will you? See if any of 'em know those two dames. I'll have to tell the commissioner a story—and I gotta make it good."

Powell went out with Hunziker and spent three hours checking up with the taxi company and its drivers before he finally found the man he wanted. The hackman, a stocky, freckle-faced youth, remembered the two women who had come from the Club Altrazar the night before. He drove Powell to an address on Bliss Street.

He even knew the apartment they had gone to. He had waited out front, he said, while he lighted a cigarette and had seen the light go on in a front room on the third floor. He pointed out this window when the cab stopped.

Powell, perking up a bit at his sudden change in luck, told the driver to wait and stepped across the sidewalk into the dim vestibule of the seedy-looking apartment house. He saw from the names under the mail boxes along the right wall that although the blonde had given him the wrong address she had given her right name. Elsie Dubois was there in the name slot for apartment 3-B. He could not find Blanche Avery's name anywhere.

The door to the foyer was open and he crossed this and climbed the imitation marble stairs to the third floor. He knocked at the door of the left front apartment.

Seconds later a knob rattled, a lock clicked and the door inched open. Powell never gave the opening movement of the door a chance to stop. He had no warrant; he was, legally, in wrong. But he was sure of himself this time and he had long ago decided to try different methods from those used the night before, if he ever got another chance at the blonde.

He slammed his shoulder against the door panel and leaned forward. The door yielded space slowly for the first few inches, then swung wide. Powell stepped inside, kicked it shut with his foot and faced Elsie Dubois.

She looked older than she had last night. Or maybe it was her anger. He caught the quick flash of fury in her eyes as she regained her balance, saw the muscles of her jaws tighten.

He said, "Hello, baby," and watched her for a moment.

SHE was dressed in a worn velvet negligée; the mules on her bare feet were shoddy and her bleached hair was frowsy and disarranged.

"Get out!" she snapped. "You can't come bustin' in here and—"

"I'm here, ain't I?" Powell's thick face was expressionless except for eyes that were smoldering. His voice was even, unhurried.

"What do you want?"

"I want to know more about that party last night. You know your boy friend—"

"Can I help it if he falls downstairs in a pass-out?"

"Maybe not." Powell moved slowly across the flashily furnished living room and the woman backed before him. "But I'm curious about that party."

Powell took out a cigarette, lighted it, blew smoke from pursed lips. "Yates was drunk—so you say; so was Guyer. But you and your girl friend were pretty sober. I been wonderin' about that. And Kresser, the headwaiter, said you'd been raisin' hell up in that dining room. You

wouldn't try to roll him up there or anything, would you?"

"Why you dirty—" Elsie Dubois, who had dropped into a chair, came to her feet with a feline quickness and struck out at the detective. "You big tramp! You—"

He caught her wrists, held them steady until she stopped struggling. He said: "You know he's dead, don't you?"

She said: "I read it in the paper."

Powell glanced about the room. He couldn't see any newspaper. "What paper?"

He saw her lips tighten then, knew she was lying.

He said, taking a chance shot: "I've been thinkin' that your boy friend might've already had his skull cracked when he took that dive. That would make it murder. Let's you and me take a ride to headquarters."

"Wait a minute." The woman's voice was suddenly hoarse and when she tried to pull away Powell let her go. "I don't know anything about this. We go out for a date with these two fellows; we go to the Altrazar for supper and a few drinks—"

Powell did not hear the door open. He was so intent on what the woman said that he thought they were alone until he heard the low command. "Hold everything now!"

Powell spun about. Two men stood in the doorway. One of them was as tall as the detective but his weight made him look almost stocky. He had a swart face and close-set ears. In a thick hand was a heavy automatic. The other man closed the door. He was thin, sleek, with light eyes and a pasty-white face.

The big man said: "Get your clothes Elsie."

Powell started to walk toward the two by the door. The big man said: "Take it easy. We got a date with Elsie."

Powell hesitated a moment. There was no great threat in the big man's voice, but there was in his manner. He knew instinctively the fellow couldn't be bluffed. He had never seen either of them before, but he did not intend to have them play out the hand if he could help it. He had looked too long for this woman to lose her so simply.

And in the back of his head the thought persisted, that maybe he was right, that there was something about Yates' death that had not come to light. But it would be silly to go for his gun. Covered as he was, he'd stand a better chance with his fists.

He walked directly toward the big man.

The sleek man said: "It's a copper, Maxie. Let him have it!"

The fellow smirked and said: "Easy, Joe." Then, "This could be a nice party if you'd behave."

Powell took another easy step. The fellow continued: "Remember, you're askin' for it."

Joe moved a couple feet to one side and pulled out a blackjack. Then it happened. Joe cocked his arm. Powell knocked him sprawling with a quick, straight right and lunged for the big man's gun. He grabbed the wrist, but before he could swing his other fist forward the fellow caught him on the chin with a left hook.

Powell, still hanging to the gun wrist, went to his knees. He felt the wrist being jerked from his grasp, sensed a movement at his side; then something exploded in his head and a blanket of darkness blotted out consciousness.

WHEN Powell opened his eyes he lay on his back in the center of the living room. He was dizzy, felt sick at his stomach. He tried to move, found that his hands had been fastened behind his

back, probably by the same sort of thing that bound his feet: adhesive tape.

He rolled around until he had a look at the entire room, saw there was nothing to help him—except the telephone. He strained at his bindings for a moment until he realized it was useless; then he rolled to the phone table, kicked it sideways. The telephone hit the floor and the receiver flew from the hook.

He shoved the receiver within reach of his ear with his nose, wiggled up so that his lips were near the mouthpiece. He said, "Hello—hello," then listened. He jiggled the receiver arm with his forehead. His eyes followed the cord. It had been yanked out of the box on the wall.

He began to curse in a soft monotone. After a few minutes he stopped and began to think. He could yell. That might bring help. But the thought of being found this way, the thought of what the newspapers would do to this incident after what had happened last night was too bitter. It was bad enough now, without having any further disgrace heaped upon his head.

For some minutes he lay motionless. One thought that he kept turning over and over in his head gave him a bit of comfort. There was something screwy about Yates' death. There might have been some truth in the wild thought he had suggested to Elsie Dubois just before her two playmates had come in—that Yates had been slugged before he went head first down those stairs.

That really was what had thrown him in the hole from the start. He could not see how a man could fall down carpeted stairs and get a fracture so severe that it would give him a fatal concussion.

But if he did not get loose pretty soon and— His eyes fell on the street windows and he remembered the taxi. If he could get the fellow's attention—

He rolled toward the windows and had gained his knees when he heard the door open. This time a grin of satisfaction swept his somber face. It was the freckled taxi driver.

His eyes widened, then narrowed. He whistled softly, came to Powell's side and ripped the tape from his wrists. He said: "You'd been in here a half hour. I didn't know—but I remembered the apartment and I thought I might take a look."

Powell rubbed his wrists. "And what a thought."

THE first thing Powell did when he got back to headquarters was to call the medical examiner's office. This time he got his man and a report on the autopsy. He listened for fully five minutes before he hung up, and when he finished there was a peculiar gleam in his dark eyes, a shining reflection of some inner thought that was both dangerous and shrewd.

He went downstairs to the detention cells and had the keeper open the one occupied by Guyer, who had been moved that morning. The man's thin face was flushed with anger and he took the offensive immediately.

"Say. What the hell's the idea? You ain't got any right to hold me. Werner dropped his complaint. I want a hearing and—"

"Take it easy." Powell dropped down on the cot and his manner and voice were calm. "I just wanted to talk to you before we let you out. I been busy today—first chance I've had."

Guyer's shifty eyes grew wary. "Then you ain't got anything against me?"

"Not exactly." Powell's thick face was composed, tired-looking. Only the intense, shrewd expression in his dark eyes hinted at his feelings, and apparently Guyer was too excited to take note of this.

"You can run along," continued Powell, "as soon as I check over your story. Now see if I got this straight. You didn't know Yates very well. You ran into him last night and the two of you picked up these two dames, took 'em to the Altrazar."

Guyer's thin face took on a sly smile and he nodded assent.

"You had a little party—got plastered."

Again Guyer nodded.

Powell said: "Just how plastered did you get?"

Guyer looked surprised. "Why—I don't know. I guess we were right on the edge. The way I figure it, Yates must've got the pass-out just as he started down the stairs."

"And just how drunk were you?"

Guyer spoke irritably. "How do I know? I—"

"I was wondering if you knew what took place in that private dining room—everything that took place."

"What the hell you driving at?" A sudden shifty expression filmed Guyer's eyes.

"I don't know," said Powell evenly. "But I got a hunch—an idea that Yates got his skull cracked in that dining room." He watched Guyer narrowly, saw the man start. He continued quickly before the fellow could reply.

"What I mean is—you were too drunk to know it. But for some reason, somebody came into that dining room and slugged Yates. He already had that fractured skull when he went down those stairs."

"You're nuts."

Powell smiled. "Maybe. But I've got some information you haven't got. If you were drunk enough, it might have happened. But"—Powell hesitated; measured his words for the effect—"those two dames weren't so drunk. They'll know if I'm right. We're gonna pick 'em up just as soon as I finish with you.

"The papers are after my scalp. I'm gonna give 'em a story. I'm gonna tell them what I think happened, hint that I got information. The reason I'm tellin' you is this: if you're in the clear, O. K.; if not, if there's something behind this and it looks like you squealed, you may get the business. How about it? O. K. to give out the story?"

POWELL waited. His voice gave no hint of the turmoil in his brain. Outwardly, he was a slow, guileless detective. But his question put it directly up to Guyer and he saw the man's nervousness reflecting in his eyes, in his trembling fingers, in the way he wet his lips before he spoke.

"Why sure." Guyer gulped and his Adam's apple moved up and down in his throat. "Tell the papers what you want. I think you're nuts, but it's your funeral. Of course," he added hastily "you might be right. I might've been too drunk to—"

Powell stood up. "I'll send word down to let you out; then we'll pick up the two dames. But don't run out on us. We may need your story when this murder gets to court."

"Murder?" wheezed Guyer nervously.

"Yeah," said Powell as he closed the door, "Murder."

Powell found Hunziker upstairs. The tall blond detective spoke with an undercurrent of excitement in his voice.

"We found your blonde."

"Swell." Powell's face brightened. "Where did you—"

"It wasn't me. I checked those Werner employees, didn't get to first base. But they just found a woman that answered her description in a car down on Second Street—by the warehouses. She had a corset full of slugs."

Powell's eyes widened and his jaw went slack. Then he began to curse softly.

Hunziker said: "They want you to identify her."

Powell stopped cursing. The satisfaction that he was on the right track was small now. It looked as if he would be too late. There was another girl—that scared kid of the night before. If someone had the finger on her—the thought was a bitter accusation. Guyer was his last chance.

"You got your coupe here?" Powell grabbed Hunziker by the arm, spun him about.

"Yeah, but—"

"Get it. I threw a scare into Guyer. I gave him a question that had only one answer. I'm gonna let him out. If he's mixed up in this—and I think he is—he's got to square himself with somebody before the newspapers come out with a story he thinks I'm givin' 'em. We'll tail him. It's the only chance we got."

CHAPTER FOUR

Telephone Clue

WHILE Hunziker got out his own coupe, Powell made arrangements for Guyer's release. Fifteen minutes later the two detectives were a half block down the street from the entrance to headquarters building.

Powell was telling of what had happened to him that afternoon. "—and those two hoods must've come into the room just as the Dubois woman was givin' me her line. It must've sounded like she had been squealing."

"Looks like you got something," grunted Hunziker.

"Yeah. And there's another girl mixed up in this. She might've stayed with the blonde last night, but she don't live there. I checked all the clothes—they were the same size. If I've put that kid on the spot—"

He broke off as the thin form of Steve Guyer came out of headquarters and hurried toward the next corner.

Hunziker slipped the car into gear and followed slowly. Guyer turned right on Broad Street, walked two blocks and ducked into a corner drug store.

Powell stiffened. "He's gonna phone. He don't know you—I'll stay in the car."

Hunziker hurried down the street and into the drug store.

About five minutes later he came out again. Right after that, Powell saw Guyer step out into the street and flag a taxi.

Hunziker climbed into the coupe, passed Powell a slip of paper. "I got in the booth next to his. He called two numbers. One of 'em was a woman's."

Powell grunted in satisfaction and slipped out from behind the wheel, stepped to the pavement. "Tail Guyer. Don't stop him unless he tries to leave town. But don't lose him. I'm gonna find that dame he called."

The address Powell got from the telephone operator was about two miles from the business district of the city. The house itself was a two-story, plain brick building that looked like a private dwelling.

An elderly woman with gray hair and an old-fashioned black satin dress answered his ring.

He said: "Does Miss Avery live here?"

"Yes"—Powell gave a sigh of relief that turned quickly to dismay—"but she's not in just now."

"Do you know when she'll be back? Is she your daughter or—"

"Oh, no. She has a room here. Since my husband died I've had to—"

"When will she be back?" pressed Powell.

"Why, I don't know. She left about five minutes ago. Two men came for her and—"

"Was one of 'em a big fellow, dark-skinned and—"

"Yes. I believe he was. And the other man was—"

Powell did not wait for the woman to finish. He muttered thanks and ran down the stairs to the taxi. The other telephone number Guyer had called was the Club Altrazar. Powell gave this address to the driver.

He knew what his job was now. There were still some unanswered questions in the back of his head; details that he could not figure. But he had the fundamentals.

Because he could not believe Yates suffered fatal injuries from the fall down the stairs, because he did not trust Werner, he had pushed ahead with an investigation that had no particular goal. The attack in the Dubois woman's apartment had built up a crazy idea of his; the talk with the medical examiner strengthened this; the death of Elsie Dubois clinched his idea. But if he couldn't find that Avery girl—Guyer might get the works too. Then he'd never get proof, would have the death of three people on his hands.

At the moment only one of these seemed to count. That Avery girl reminded him somehow of Janet Connors. Well, Werner might be made to squawk.

There was no gritting of teeth or clenching of fists in Powell's attitude. He had the same feeling about this that he had had about other things in the past. It was a job to be done. There was a certain bitterness in the back of his head because so far he had been unable to accomplish anything definite. But except for the straight, intense eyes that stared at the unrolling stretch of pavement in front of the cab, there was no outward indication of his thoughts.

It was seven thirty and nearly dark when he dismissed the taxi in front of the Altrazar. Street lights had been on for a half hour and the fan-shaped sign which blazed over the club's doorway spoke of some activity inside.

He strode through the little foyer, took off his hat as he entered the main room and brushed by Kresser's deferential "Good evening Mr. Powell," as though he did not see him. The orchestra was playing a slow fox trot; there were about a dozen couples on the floor and early diners occupied perhaps a third of the tables.

POWELL climbed the wide, carpeted stairs, moved down the narrow hallway past the private rooms to Werner's office. He went in without knocking.

"How many times have I told you—" Werner who was studying some papers on his desk looked up as he spoke. "Oh. Hello, Powell." His manner changed to one of disdainful nonchalance. "I thought it was Kresser."

The detective walked up to the desk, spread his palms on the top and put his weight on them.

Werner lifted shaggy eyebrows, said: "What's on your mind?"

Powell said: "That blonde that was here last night with Yates got knocked off this afternoon."

"Yeah?"

"And we can't find that kid that was with her."

"So what?"

"I want to know where you put her."

"Where *I* put her." Werner's brows drew down. "Say, what the hell you drivin' at?"

"She and Guyer are the only witnesses left to Yates' murder."

A look of crafty guile suffused Werner's thick face. He shoved his lower lip up so that it overlapped the upper, hesitated, said: "Listen, copper. If you've got business here, get on with it. If you want to make a pinch it's O. K. with me. Just show me the warrant and—"

"If I want to pinch you, Werner," said Powell slowly, fighting the anger that surged through his veins, "I won't need a warrant."

"I'll have your job."

"Yeah?" The detective laughed. "You've practically got it now. I'm due for a month's suspension anyway. I might as well go whole hog. Yates died in the station house. But he was murdered in your dining room. And I'm gonna stay here and work you over till I find out where that Avery girl is."

Werner sneered; his attempted laugh was false.

"But before I start," added Powell, "I think I'll search the place."

Werner came to his feet with a curse. "Not without a warrant you won't."

"That's what you say," growled Powell and started around the desk.

Werner grabbed for one of the two telephones on the desk top. Powell's left hand flicked out and slapped the instrument to the floor.

Werner's right hand shot to his hip. Powell stepped close, jabbed the man's chin up with a sharp left, then crossed his right flush to the jaw. Werner's knees buckled and he would have pitched forward on his face if Powell had not caught him.

The detective lowered the unconscious man to the desk chair, took out his handcuffs and fastened limp wrists behind Werner's back. Then he pushed back the chair, picked up the fallen telephone and began to look through the desk drawers.

He spent five minutes with these and found nothing of any importance to him. He glanced at Werner who was slumped in the chair with his chin on his chest, decided he'd better search the fellow. He found a flat thirty-two automatic in a hip pocket and slipped it inside the waistband of his trousers under his vest.

He started to search the filing cabinets. Each of them were letter size and five drawers high. In the back of the bottom drawer of the first cabinet he found a square, black leather box.

Bringing this to the desk, he took off the leather cover, pursed his lips, and for the first time that day a slow smile worked at the corners of his mouth. He took out a camera, a squarish instrument with a film pack in the back, then reached in his vest pocket for the black strip of paper he had found that morning in the dining room.

He saw now that Werner was conscious. His chin was still on his chest and he looked up through his shaggy brows with malignant, hateful eyes.

Powell said: "I found this strip of paper this morning, but I was too dumb to hook it up with your idea. It's one of these tabs at the back here that you pull out when you want to take a picture, ain't it?"

Powell thumbed the remaining tabs of the film pack. Werner remained silent.

The detective reached for one of the telephones, gave a number and a minute later was talking with a photographer at headquarters.

"Mike — Powell . . . Yeah. Listen. Come up to the Club Altrazar right away . . . Yeah—Werner's office at the end of the second-floor hall. Don't make any fuss, just come right up—and hurry."

MIKE COYLE stepped into Werner's office fifteen minutes later. Powell was sitting on the edge of the desk, smoking a cigarette. He said: "Did this strip of paper come from this film pack?" He offered the bit of paper and the camera.

Coyle, a thin, bald-headed man with white eyebrows, examined the camera, said: "I don't know—but it's the right size."

Powell said, "Hah," and stood up. "Take that box down to headquarters.

How long'll it take to get me a print of the films that're exposed?"

"A half hour, maybe a little longer. Want me to call you?"

"No. I ain't sure where I'll be. I'll call you back."

Werner sat up in his chair and his voice was thick with rage. "You can't get away with this, Powell. Yates was drunk. He fell downstairs and—"

Powell turned to Coyle. "Get Kresser, the headwaiter, up here."

Werner continued his tirade until Kresser entered. Then Powell said: "Was Yates drunk last night?"

Kresser's pale eyes clouded. "Why, of course."

"Of course, hunh?" growled Powell. "Well, how drunk was he?"

"Why—I don't know. I—"

"How many drinks did he buy here?"

"Sixteen, I think." Kresser seemed to cringe from the detective's steady gaze. "The two men had five apiece—the two girls—"

"You lie!" Powell snapped the words out and grabbed Kresser by the lapels. "That was a stall—coming to my table and telling me you had a rowdy party. The M.E. says Yates wasn't drunk. There was practically no alcohol in his system when he made the autopsy. He might've had a drink, maybe two—"

"He was drunk," snarled Werner. "The alcohol must've evaporated or something."

"He was sober," said Powell evenly. "I put the bee on the M.E. for five minutes. He's got the facts—and he'll take the stand and prove 'em."

The room was suddenly quiet with a silence that could almost be felt. It surprised even Powell and he spoke softly when he continued. "So how come Yates falls downstairs—when he wasn't drunk?"

Werner said: "How the hell do I know?"

"You know," accused Powell. "He got his skull cracked in that dining room. But he walked, talked and acted like a drunk when he came out. That's why he fell—or was pushed down those stairs."

Werner's rugged face went pale at Powell's words, but he got control of himself with an obvious effort, said: "You talk a good case, but they'll laugh it out of court—if it ever gets that far."

POWELL yanked Kresser around and glared at him. He knew the truth of what Werner said. He had a long way to go—and that Avery girl's life still hung in the balance.

To Coyle he said: "Take this guy with you. Hold him as an accessory after the fact—a material witness, anything, but hold him. I'll take the responsibility."

He grinned at Kresser but there was no warmth in the grin. "You lied yourself into this—maybe you can talk your way out."

Coyle took the frightened headwaiter by the arm and led him protesting from the room. Powell waited until the door closed, then went back to the desk.

He met Werner's stare of hate with eyes that narrowed slightly as he spoke. "I've got a hunch we'll find a picture of Yates on that film—on one of 'em anyway. If we do, we'll know why nobody ever squawks when you put the screws on 'em. Brought your clip-joint methods up to a big business basis, hunh? Went in for—"

The sudden shrill of a telephone on the desk stopped the sentence. Powell stiffened for a moment, looked down at the two instruments as though he were trying to see who was on the other end of the wire. As the telephone repeated its shrilled insistence, he slipped his service revolver from his shoulder holster.

His idea, to force Werner to answer, he discarded as a sudden flash of inspira-

tion showed him the possibilities of the two instruments.

He picked up the silent telephone, glanced at the number above the mouthpiece of the other one. To the operator who answered he spoke in terse, forceful sentences. He had to wait while he was switched to another operator. The other telephone shrilled again as this second operator answered.

His language was not gentlemanly this time; it was curt, a bit profane, but it got results. "Trace the call coming in on Circle Eight-nine-seven-three and don't miss it. I'll call you back."

He pronged the receiver and grabbed for the other instrument, said, "Yeah?" hoarsely.

The voice, a man's said: "We got the other dame. What do we do now?"

Powell glanced at Werner who had struggled from the chair and poised for a leap. He cocked his knee and jammed his Number Ten against the handcuffed man's stomach. Werner flopped back into the chair and yelled, but the detective had his hand over the mouthpiece.

He said, "Hold her till I get there," quickly, and hung up before Werner could shout again.

CHAPTER FIVE

A Little Thing Like a Slug

THE taxi stopped in front of 384 Prospect Street—the address given Powell by the telephone operator who had traced the incoming call—and the detective pushed Werner to the sidewalk ahead of him.

It was a seedy, down-at-the-heels neighborhood of outmoded apartments and three-family houses. 384 was a five-storied building of weatherbeaten brick. Across the wide glass door the words *Braemore Arms* were fashioned in swirling gilt letters.

Powell pushed Werner into a square, tiled vestibule whose stuccoed walls were cracking, guided him up two linoleum-covered steps and through the unlocked door to the foyer. They crossed a well worn carpet and stepped into the single, self-operating elevator opposite.

Powell pushed the button marked *3*. A few seconds later he guided Werner to Apartment 3-C and took the handcuffs, which he had shifted to manacle the man's hand in front of him, from his wrists.

He held his service revolver in his right hand and spoke softly. "I'm goin' through this time—and there ain't gonna be any slips. If you think I'm gonna let a little thing like puttin' a slug in you stop me, you're nuts. Because in a pinch I can make out you were resisting arrest."

He knocked on the door, whispered: "Talk nice!"

A voice said: "Who's it?"

Powell slipped behind Werner, jabbed the revolver in his ribs. The man flinched, said: "Sam."

The instant the door opened Powell put his shoulder in Werner's back and charged. Werner was catapulted smack into the tall, sleek man called Joe, and the two of them crashed to the floor. Powell's gun covered the big, swart man before he could react from his amazement. Blanche Avery, white-faced and wide-eyed with a gag over her mouth, sat in one corner of the room on a davenport.

Powell closed the door and stood with his back against it while Werner and Joe got to their feet. Then he said: "Just take it easy now." He backed toward the girl, added: "Maybe you'd better put those hands up a bit."

As soon as the sullen men obeyed reluctantly, he continued to the girl and took the gag from her mouth. He said, "It's O. K. now," and came back to search the two gunmen.

He took a thirty-two automatic from

Joe, pulled open a drawer in the oblong center table and tossed the gun into it. From Maxie he took the same heavy automatic he had seen that afternoon. He smelled of the muzzle, knew at once that it had been fired recently.

He put this with the other automatic, closed the drawer and said: "Well, it looks like we're getting some place."

Werner broke into rapid, excited speech, ignoring Powell for the moment and explaining to his men how he had been trapped and why he was here.

Maxie growled: "Keep your shirt on! He ain't got any proof, has he?"

"I got your gun and when they check it with the slugs they take from the Dubois woman—"

Blanche Avery screamed and Powell thought for a moment she was going to faint. She said: "Elsie—she's not—they didn't—"

Powell exhaled slowly, nodded. "They had to get her out of the way—and you were the next to go."

The words, the obvious conclusion, sobered the girl. She sat erect on the edge of the davenport and her frightened eyes swept to Werner's white face. "Oh," she said. "Oh. I didn't think—" She broke off and started to sob.

"We got your guns," said Powell, turning back to the big man. "And maybe we can find something on that camera that will help." He went to a small telephone table beside the doorway of the hall leading to the apartment's other rooms, pulled out the little stool and sat down.

He turned to face the three men, kept them covered with his revolver, and gave a number out of the corner of his mouth. Then he said: "Gimme the Bureau of Identification." A moment later. "This is Dan Powell. Lemme speak to Coyle . . . In the dark room? All right. I'll hang on here."

He kept the receiver to his ear, but drew away from the mouthpiece and spoke quietly to the girl. "Are these the two guys that slugged Yates?" He saw the girl hesitate, added: "You'd better come clean, kid. I'll give you a better break than Elsie Dubois got."

THAT did it. The girl nodded her head and spoke in eager, voluble phrases. "Yes. But I didn't know. We—Elsie and I worked in the burlesque at the Bijou. I'd only been in town two months and I couldn't get a job or—" She broke off, fought for control of her emotions.

"I finally got in the chorus. That's how I met Elsie. Mr. Yates came down one night. He tried to date me up, kept at me every day. I told Elsie. Then last night she said she had a date fixed up—that Mr. Yates was all right—that we'd just go some place and dance and then go home.

"We went to the Altrazar. We had one drink. Then these two men came in, held us up. That man"—she pointed to Werner—"came in then. He had a blank check and they made Mr. Yates sign it—it was for five thousand, I think."

"And to make sure he didn't stop payment on it," snapped Powell, "they brought in a camera and—"

"Yes. They told Mr. Yates to take off his coat and vest, to slip off his suspenders. I think I screamed. One of them hit me. Elsie took her dress off her shoulder. But Mr. Yates wouldn't do as they said. He shouted for help and tried to fight.

"This man"—she pointed to Maxie—"knocked him down and when he tried to get up, struck him on the head with a blackjack."

The girl paused to sob quietly. "I didn't know they were going to do anything like that. I only—"

"Go on with the story," said Powell.

"Well—Mr. Yates didn't get up. They

had to work over him for a half hour His head was bleeding a little and they cleaned the blood away. Finally he came to, but he acted as if he was drunk. But they took his coat and vest off anyway and—"

"Did they take a picture?" interrupted Powell. The girl nodded tearful assent and the detective said: "Oke. That's enough."

But the girl was not quite through. She continued her confession. "Mr. Guyer took us to the top of the stairs and gave Mr. Yates a shove. They gave Elsie and me a hundred dollars and told us if we ever talked they'd kill us."

Powell looked at Werner and his lip curled. "The same sort of rat you used to be, hunh? The same clip-joint racket. Married guys with families and money that are on the loose. Dubois and Guyer made the plant for you. And the camera gag is good—a picture to show the wife if your sucker threatened to squawk."

Powell swore under his breath. "And when the old act boomeranged"—his lips tightened—"you took the smartest way out. Witnesses would prove Yates was O. K. when he came in. If you sneaked him out and we picked him up with a concussion, we might come back to you. But if he fell downstairs and cracked his head there'd be plenty of witnesses to clear you.

"And the cleverest part"—Powell hesitated—"was having Yates pinched for the bill and the breakage. You knew he was damn near gone—knew if you yelled for a pinch we wouldn't suspect you because your play looked on the level. That was neat, but—"

Coyle's voice in the telephone receiver checked the sentence. The photographer said: "We got a picture of Yates, all right. He's in a clinch with that dame that got bumped this afternoon. She's got her dress half off and he looks—"

"His face," rapped Powell. "Is it marked?"

"You can see a mark on his forehead," said Coyle, "and it looks like there was blood on his neck."

Powell grunted, said: "That'll do it. We—"

He stopped the next word at his lips as a hard, round object jabbed forcibly at the nape of his neck. He heard Coyle talking, but he heard another smooth voice more distinctly.

"Hang up, and drop that gun!"

Powell stiffened. The voice was Guyer's and it came from that hall door at his back. The gun in his neck was cold and steady. He hesitated but an instant. Then he let the revolver slip from his grasp, hung up on Coyle's clicking voice.

WERNER pounced upon Powell's gun the moment it hit the floor and Maxie and Joe leaped toward him. Powell made no attempt to struggle; the girl screamed at that moment and checked the intended assault on him.

Joe crossed the room and slapped the girl's mouth. Powell bit his lip and stood motionless as Maxie opened the table drawer and took out the two guns.

There was method in Powell's attitude. Any struggle, with Werner and Guyer holding guns would be futile. He would be searched. But he still had the flat automatic tucked in the top of his pants. By behaving he might have a chance to use it. Guyer circled around in front of him and his laugh was a leer. "What a sap," he crowed. Then, to Werner, "I damn near barged in the front door, but I heard the copper speaking his piece, so I went around and came in the back way."

Werner, his confidence returning, was smiling. His voice was quiet, assured. "Nice work, Steve. It began to look like he really had a case on us."

Joe finished gagging the almost hysteri-

cal girl, came back to the center of the room, said: "Let's put the slug on him right here."

"No." Werner took Joe by the arm. "We'll put the slug on him, but not here. This is no shooting gallery. We gotta work this right. With him and the girl gone, we'll be in the clear. They can't even hang the Dubois job on you and Maxie if you—"

He broke off and his voice hardened. "What're your brains for?" He glared at Maxie. "What the hell did you hang on to that gun for?"

Maxie shrugged. "I don't know. I like it, I guess. It's a sweet rod and—"

Werner snorted in disgust. "Well I'll handle this job, personally. And that gun goes just where these two go—about five miles out to sea. If they haven't got a corpse, they haven't got a murder rap."

He turned to Joe. "Get out the sedan. Wait for us out front. We'll take a little ride to South Harbor and get the launch."

Joe left the room and Werner told Maxie to search Powell. The detective raised his hands. His broad face did not betray the anxiety he felt, and he stared at Blanche Avery, saw that she was dry-eyed and rigid, as though in a trance. He sucked in his stomach and waited.

Maxie's hands slapped his hips, his coat pockets, opened his coat and felt under both arms. When he stepped back Powell exhaled slowly and lowered his hands. There was one advantage to an automatic at that. He'd never considered its compact flatness any help in his work before.

Werner said: "O. K. Let's get started." He looked at Powell, sneered and repeated the detective's own warning. "If you think a little thing like putting a slug in you is gonna stop me from goin' through with this, you're screwy." He laughed and opened the door.

As they walked through the deserted downstairs foyer Werner spoke his last word of warning. "Behave, copper!" He took the gag from the girl's mouth, added: "You too, sister."

Powell went through the outer door first, with Guyer following right behind with a gun in the small of his back. Powell felt the hard, flat automatic pressing against his stomach and he wondered how long it would take him to get it out; how many shots Guyer could take before he could return one.

He hesitated on the sidewalk in front of the house. A long heavy sedan was parked about twenty feet up the street. The motor was running; he could see the whitish vapor curling up out of the exhaust pipe. From the corner of his eye he saw Blanche Avery pull up even with him. Maxie and Werner were behind and on either side of her.

Then he saw Hunziker.

IT was intuition more than anything else that told him this. The man who lurked across the street in the shadows of a telephone pole was nothing more than a blotch in the night. Powell could not see the face, could make out no distinguishing features.

But the man looked tall and thin. And he remembered his command to his partner—to follow Guyer. If it was Hunziker, he had been tailing the fellow for hours, had followed him to this apartment house, was waiting for something to happen.

Powell thought: "Will he recognize me? If he does, he'll know something screwy's up. Maybe he'll follow this car, pick up a couple traffic cops on the way. If he'll just take it easy and—"

But mental telepathy could have been nothing but an expression to Hunziker. Or maybe he was immune. At any rate he had other plans. He stepped out from the shadows and started across the street.

Powell had taken two forward steps

while he had been thinking. When he saw Hunziker—he could see it was Hunziker now—start across the street, he knew what he had to do.

He couldn't stop the shooting now. But if he let his partner come, they'd get the girl, get him. And with three or four to one against him, Hunziker would not have a prayer.

Powell turned his head. Blanche Avery was two feet to one side and a half step behind. Without another thought, he leaned quickly toward her and swept his right arm in a quick, powerful swing. The back of his hand caught the girl at the side of the head. She stumbled and fell sprawling as Powell wheeled and reached for the gun at his belt.

He heard Hunziker say, "Hey!" Then a gun barked and he felt a quick shock along his side under his armpit. He had the gun out before Guyer could shoot again, and, spinning as he was, he wrapped his left arm around the man's waist and hugged him close.

Guns roared in salvos after that; roared and sent their crashing echoes through the narrow street. The action seemed like instantaneous bits of a movie film, jumbled together without sequence or timing.

He heard Guyer curse, felt him try to jerk from his grasp. As he struggled, Powell's flank was exposed to the yellow tongues that spurted from two guns ten feet away. He felt the shock of lead on the right side of his chest. He felt Guyer's body jerk twice in his grasp, stiffen, then go limp.

Maxie and Werner were still shooting. So was Hunziker, from a spot in the middle of the pavement. He realized that the shock in his wrist was the slap of recoil from his own gun. Behind him a car roared to life and sped out of his consciousness. He let the dead weight of Guyer's body slip from his arm.

Then a sudden silence swept back through the street, as suddenly as it had fled. For a few brief seconds Powell heard no sound but his own sharp breathing. Hunziker stood spread-legged in the street. Werner was down on his back. Maxie had dropped on all fours. He moved forward about five feet on his hands and knees, then went flat on his face.

The silence vanished again. Windows in apartments overhead flew open. A woman stuck out her head and screamed. Blanche Avery stirred on the sidewalk.

Hunziker leaped forward and slipped an arm around Powell's waist. "O. K., Dan?"

"O. K." He felt tired now, suddenly weak. The wounds in his chest and side had not yet started to pain. He did not think they would be serious. But he was bleeding a lot; his shirt felt sticky.

He sat down on the curb and said: "The girl's O. K. I had to slap her out of the way. Watch her."

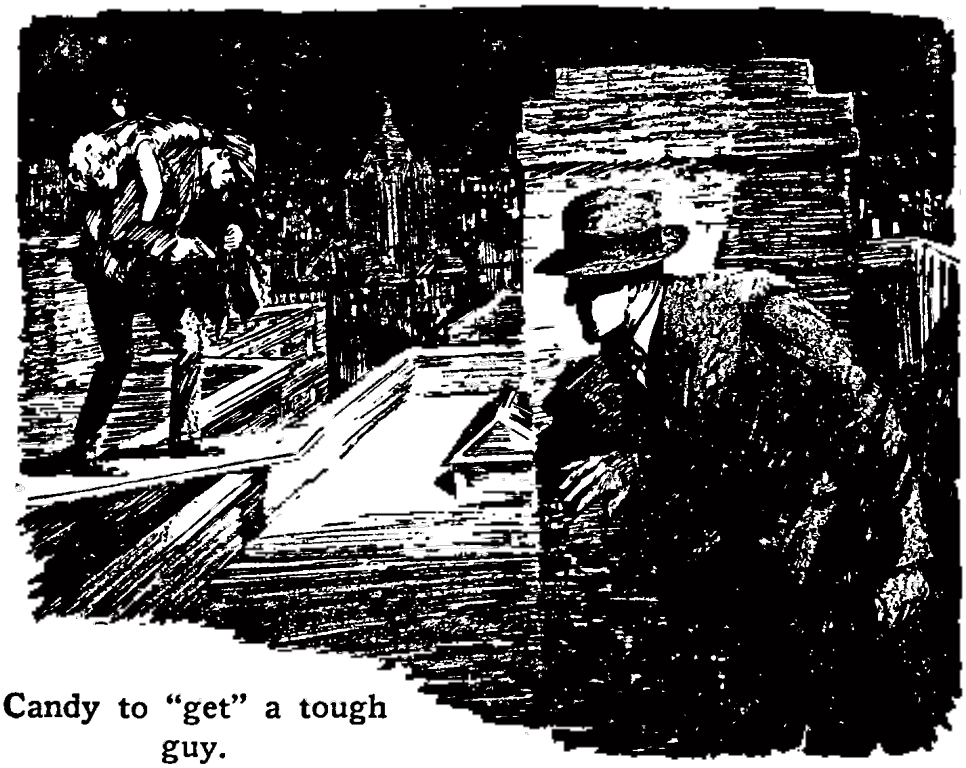
Hunziker yelled up at some head framed in a window above to call headquarters and get some men and an ambulance. He went to Blanche Avery and helped her to her feet. He looked at Powell, said: "They did get you, didn't they?"

"Not too bad." Powell glanced at the girl. "You all right, kid?"

"Why—I—" The girl rubbed her cheek, stammered in frightened tones. "Yes. I'm all right."

Hunziker said: "There was a guy in the car. He got away."

"We'll pick him up," grunted Powell. He hesitated, added: "I feel like I might have to go to the hospital. Call up the girl friend, will you? Tell her everything is O. K. and that I'm not hurt much. She's been worryin' her head off about last night. Tell her it looks like I might still be in good standing."



Candy to "get" a tough guy.

LICORICE DROPS

By George Harmon Coxe

THE taxi pulled out from the curb. Detective Sergeant Ray Sparman, having directed the driver to headquarters, settled himself in one corner of the seat and glanced at the wide-eyed young woman beside him.

His alert blue eyes observed the dark-haired girl; tall and slender—too slender, Sparman thought, as though the smartly plain clothes she wore had taken much of a small salary that should have been spent for food. Her attractive face had a pinched, tired look, but the clean-cut chin was firm.

"A game kid," Sparman thought, and looked out of the lowered cab window.

Darkness was closing in rapidly on the early-summer evening. The streets were alive with traffic. Roadster tops were down; sedan windows were lowered as every one sought to take advantage of the fresh coolness of the evening.

The cab stopped at the corner of Charles and Boylston Streets. Sparman saw the traffic light was against them. He had just turned to look again at the girl when it happened.

He felt the cab tilt slightly under some new weight. A rough voice, low yet clear, rang in his ears.

"Hold it!"

Sparman quickly turned his head. Framed in the lowered window was the head and shoulders of a chalky-faced, pale-eyed youth. In a thin hand a snub-nosed automatic was steady. Over the man's shoulder, Sparman caught a quick glimpse of a dirty-faced driver of another taxi, crowded close. Sparman went rigid for an instant. Then he inhaled slowly and inched his right hand toward his hip.

"Hold it, copper!" The voice was sharp now. "Hold it, or you'll have a dead doll in your lap."

Sparman's hand stopped. He heard the door at the other side of the taxi open. A dark-skinned man with a felt hat pulled low, sidled into the cab, dropped to the seat on the other side of the girl, pressed a gun against her side.

The traffic light flashed green. Gears meshed hurriedly. The thin youth opened the other door, pulled out a side seat and dropped into it, facing Sparman.

"Get goin', punk!" he snapped to the driver. "Out by Jamaica Pond." He reached toward the detective's pocket.

Sparman's muscles tensed. The youth sensed this and barked:

"One screwy move and she gets it!"

Sparman relaxed, felt his gun withdrawn, saw it disappear in the youth's pocket. A coldness swept over his body as bitter thoughts whirled through his mind.

TWO days before, the Automatic Manufacturing Co.'s paymaster had been murdered and a pay roll of twenty-six thousand dollars snatched. The policeman who was the guard had been left for dead with three slugs in his body. The only other witness, Ruth Borland, who had seen the whole show from an office window, now sat beside him.

The police went looking for Louis Maier, found him, slapped him in jail. Within twenty-four hours he was out on twenty-five thousand dollars bail; the wounded policeman's statement had been incoherent, and the girl had not yet been found.

Sparman had just located her, was taking her to spend the night at headquarters so she would be safe for the grand jury, which met the next morning. With the girl as witness, they would indict Maier so he could not be bailed. By the time of his trial the policeman and the girl would see that he got the chair. Now——

The cab was stuffy—stuffy with the stale, hot smell of whisky breaths and licorice. A momentary feeling of weariness settled over Sparman. Usually there was an air of competence about him that suggested he was put together in one piece of good, sound stuff. He was young for a detective sergeant, called a "comer" by his superiors.

He laughed as he thought of the word, and there was a chilled harshness in the laugh that echoed through the cab. The man in front of him stiffened, the trigger finger curled. Then he grunted and relaxed.

These two men, Sparman realized, were the imported gunmen whom Maier had hired to do the job with him. Ironically enough, he now sat with the three people he most wanted, and he was helpless to hold them. The girl had trusted him——

"Pull up here!"

The command to the driver checked Sparman's thoughts. He looked out as the cab stopped. They were by Jamaica Pond, in a parklike section of the city. Across the Pond

traffic was heavy—pleasure traffic. Any taxis that passed would have fares. Unless he could pick a ride it would be a mile walk back to Huntington Avenue.

The youth with the automatic opened the cab door and backed out. "Come on, copper," he sneered. "A little exercise'll do you good." Then to his partner, "Watch her, Manny."

On a sudden impulse, and under the cover of darkness, Sparman slipped a leather-covered identification card from his vest pocket. He found the girl's hand. It was damp, cold. He pressed the card into her fingers, squeezed the hand reassuringly. An answering pressure rewarded him. Then he got out.

The youth escorted him a few feet down the road and said:

"Get wise to yourself, punk. The girl'll be O. K. We'll send her on a little trip—unless you crowd us. That would be just too bad—for her."

AN hour later Sparman got out of a taxi in front of Captain Farrel's house, paid the driver and dismissed him. He stood at the curb for a moment, and mentally checked his decision.

He couldn't go back to headquarters with his story—not with a flock of reporters around. They had known he was going for the girl.

The simple daring of Maier's men would ruin the case against him, would put Sparman back on a beat. But there still was a chance and Captain Farrel was the man to see. He crossed the sidewalk and rang the door bell.

A heavyset man in house slippers opened the door. He was almost entirely bald and his big nose was like a beacon staring out of a reddish face. He opened his mouth to speak, but the words died on his lips as the grim-faced detective pushed into the hall.

"What the hell's the idea?" growled Farrel. "What's up?"

Sparman stepped into the living room, spun about and told his story to the astonished captain. When Sparman finished, Farrel swore, then paced the floor.

"You been to headquarters yet?" he snapped.

"No. The newspapers——"

"You're tellin' me." Farrel stopped pacing and faced Sparman. "Why didn't you take a chance with those two rats? There ain't a man on the force that's as quick with the gun as you are."

"Maybe. But I couldn't be quick enough to save that girl. I might've got one of 'em; with a miracle, I might've got both. But not even a miracle would've saved her. She'd been out like a light. Then where'd we be?

"Maier'll wiggle out of this if she don't testify. The cop's testimony won't be enough. Maier'll have a dozen witnesses to give him an alibi. He's got the smartest lawyer in town. But with that girl he's a goner."

Sparman snapped out a curse. "Suppose I'd been heroic and shot it out in the cab? There'd been three dead witnesses, maybe a dead cop. Maier'd give you the laugh."

"The papers'll say you were yellow," said Farrel.

"What do you think?"

Farrel looked up with a peculiar expression, as though he had just realized his accusation. He stepped over to the detective and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't be a sap," he snorted. "I know you. You got brains—and you got nerve. That's why I've been watchin' you. We need men like you on the force, Sparman.

"It's a rotten break. It'll be tough on both of us, I guess. They've been riding me lately, and if I let you handle this alone and you don't come through, the papers'll have me hung for complicity in the job."

He held up his hand as Sparman started to speak. He caught the detective's glance, and a slow grin twisted his lips.

"But what the hell? Those newspaper birds have been doing this same thing for years and they haven't been able to hang one on me yet." He slapped Sparman's shoulder. "Got any ideas?"

"I want a gun, a car, and a couple of men," said Sparman, his eyes glinting.

"What're you——"

"I got a hunch. You know Maier always worked alone. He fingers a job, hires a couple of outside gunmen, pays 'em off in cash and ships 'em out of town. This job was done the same way, and I'm the only one who's seen these two guys.

"I think they'll hole up here in town for a couple weeks where they can watch the girl. I got the number of the driver in my cab. We'll get him up here."

"What good's that gonna do?"

"Plenty. The cab those two birds sprung from was a City cab, just like the one I had. My driver ought to know the other fellow. We'll get him, find out where those killers started from—at least we'll know the district. Then I got a couple other little things that may help.

Farrel whistled softly. "Hell," he grunted. "Why didn't you say so?"

Sparman grinned. "I wanted to find out whether you were with me on it, or whether I'd have to play it alone."

Farrel snorted disgustedly as he went to the telephone.

AT eleven o'clock a dirty-faced, tousle-headed taxi driver stood in the center of Farrel's living room and awkwardly fingered his cap. Sparman had located his own driver without trouble, and as he had hoped, this man had recognized the driver of the killers' cab.

Sparman knew this was his man. That one brief glimpse of the driver over the gunman's shoulder had done the trick. The driver was stalling.

"You got me wrong," he whined. "I don't know nothin' about it. You got me mixed up with some other guy."

"Forget it!" rapped Sparman. He glanced at Farrel, then at the two plain-clothes men who stood by the door. "You're the guy. I want to know where you picked up these men; how you found me."

"Listen——" the driver began.

"You listen! You're tangled up in a murder. For all I know you're mixed up in that pay-roll job. So speak your piece or I'll slap you in the can."

The driver gulped, his face paled. "They said they'd bump me if I squawked."

"Well, make up your mind!" Sparman's tone was relentless, and the driver blurted out:

"We were down on Chestnut Street looking for some dame when they spotted you. They waited until you came out of the house with the girl, told me to follow you.

"I didn't know what it was all about until they told me to pull up alongside you at Charles and Boylston. I saw one guy jump your cab; the other one jammed a gun in my neck and slipped me ten. 'Keep your mouth shut about this,' he said, 'or it'll be curtains.' That's all I know, honest."

"Where did you pick them up in the first place?" growled Sparman.

"Memenway and Boylston."

"Now we're gettin' some place."

The driver said: "Now can I go —you ain't gonna pinch me?"

"If your story's O. K., you're clear," said Sparman. And as the relieved driver backed out of the room Sparman turned to Farrel.

"We got a start now." He looked at the two plain-clothes men, then back at Farrel. "I'll take Flynn and Cotton. Before morning we'll have that girl back—alive."

"You got till ten in the morning." Farrel scowled. "Better check on Maier. We've had a man at the front and back doors of his apartment house since they sprung him this morning. Up till two hours ago he hadn't left the place. But check it."

Sparman nodded and left the room with the two plain-clothes men. Out in the police car, Cotton got in behind the wheel and Flynn sat in the rear with Sparman. By the time they had reached the corner of Hemenway and Boylston Streets, Sparman had explained what he expected to do.

As he got out of the car he said: "Maier only lives a couple of blocks from here. You go down and talk to the boys who are watching the place. Find out everything you can, then come back here and pick me up."

Sparman watched the car roll down Hemenway Street. He knew the district well. An old apartment-house section—cheap, and respectable enough after a fashion.

TRAFFIC on Boylston Street had thinned out. An almost empty street car ground its way toward Massachusetts Avenue; a man was trying to bump his car out of a parking space; an idle group of students from the Conservatory strolled out of the corner drug store. He watched them a moment, then went inside.

At the soda fountain he lighted a cigarette and ordered a soda. "Got any licorice candy?" he asked.

A scrawny clerk plopped the drink down on the counter and said: "Yeah."

"Sell much of it?"

"No."

Sparman swallowed part of his drink, puffed on the cigarette.

"Sell any to-day?"

The clerk laughed. "Yeah, just after supper. Funny, you asking about it."

"Yeah." Sparman inhaled, surveyed the end of his cigarette. "Do you deliver things from this store? I mean, do customers call up for cigarettes, ginger ale, and that sort of thing?"

"Sure. We deliver in the neighborhood."

"Picked up any new customers for this delivery service in the past two weeks?" Sparman flashed his badge. "Think hard now, get it straight."

The clerk's eyes widened. He swallowed once. "I hardly know who——"

"Come on!" snapped Sparman. "Don't stall."

"Well, there's only one I can think of that's regular." The clerk's face brightened. "And say. That's the guy that gets the licorice drops."

Sparman grinned, though his eyes were cold. "What's the address?"

The clerk yelled an inquiry to another man, hidden by the prescription counter. "Hey, Stan, what's the address of that fellow that gets the ginger ale and the licorice drops?"

Sparman caught the address of a top-floor apartment near by. He thanked the clerk and left the store.

The police car was waiting for him, and as he piled into the back seat he said:

"Drive down to the next block." Then, "What'd you find?"

"Nothin' much," said Flynn. Kellog was out front. He says Maier ain't been out once, but he's got a front apartment and he's seen him through the window several times."

"What floor is he on?"

"Top—the fourth."

Cotton could add nothing to this and Sparman said: "I gave that girl my identification card on the chance that she'd know enough to drop it where it would do some good. If any one found it he'd turn it in. It wouldn't be hard to learn where the finder found it."

The car stopped. He ordered: "Leave the bus here on the corner. Go down to No. 344. See if you can find that card—just on a hunch the girl was wise. I'll meet you there."

The three men got out. Instead of turning down the street with Cotton and Flynn toward No. 344, Sparman walked on down to an alley that bisected the block. He turned in here, waited until his eyes became accustomed to the darkened canyon, then walked down its length.

THE alley was not more than eight feet wide, and unpaved. Apartments backed up to it throughout its entire length and most of these rear walls were flush with the edge of the alley. Here and there a lighted window showed; but most of the windows were dark. Sparman went through to the next street, then came around to No. 344.

Flynn said, "We found it," and passed Sparman the card.

"Where?"

"In the gutter right in front of the house."

Sparman grunted with satisfaction. "The kid knew her stuff. It checks with the licorice."

"What?" Cotton asked.

Sparman said: "We're getting hot. Maier's apartment is only a block away—beyond that alley back there. He's got these two birds in close where we can keep tabs on 'em. Maybe they've got the girl; maybe they haven't."

He cocked his head and looked up at the weather-stained façade of the brick apartment house. Two lighted windows on the top floor were the only sign of life.

"That'll be our apartment," he said. "And it looks like those birds are still up." He took out the gun Farrel had given him, spun the cylinder and put it in his coat pocket. "Cotton, you go back in the alley and watch this place. Flynn, you stay here and keep your eyes on those windows. I'm going up."

"Alone?"

"Sure. This is a personal job now."

As Cotton vanished around the corner, Sparman went up the steps to the darkened vestibule. The door was unlocked and a moment later he was climbing the steep stairs.

On the top floor he stopped and surveyed the narrow hall which ended in an eerie shadow. The air was stuffy, with the stale odor of a thousand greasy meals from the floors below. There was a door on his left bearing the metal number 4-A; opposite this was 4-B.

He moved past these doors to a spot midway between the front and back of the house. A dusty skylight was over his head. He pursed his lips thoughtfully and continued to the rear of the hall, looking for a ladder.

The hall was bare. He dismissed the idea, took out a bunch of keys

and attacked the rear door of apartment 4-A. Seconds later he was in the kitchen, standing motionless with his back against the door, listening.

He saw the dim outline of a doorway leading to a hall and moved toward it. At the other end of the passage he could see the worn furniture of the lighted living room. On tiptoe, and with his back against the wall, he sidled down the hall. He stopped for an instant, then stepped into the living room with his gun up.

A heavy table, littered with magazines, glasses, and bottles stood in the center of the room. Beside it, slumped down in a chair was a man. An open newspaper shielded his face. Sparman smelled licorice, caught the smacking sound of chewing. He stepped forward.

"Up with 'em!"

The man whipped the paper aside and was on his feet with catlike quickness. His dark-skinned features were convulsed. Slowly his hands moved upward.

"Hello, copper," he leered. "You ought to knock before you come in."

"Maybe you're right, Manny," Sparman moved toward the grimy front windows and raised one of them, "but I forget sometimes." He whistled through the open window and glanced quickly into the street below. Flynn moved out of an opposite areaway and sprinted across the pavement.

"NOW what, copper?" Manny's thin lips twisted in a sneer as the three men moved back into the living room ten minutes later.

Sparman and Flynn had searched the apartment, had found nothing to tip them off to the girl's whereabouts. They had forced an entrance into the other apartment on that floor and found it untenanted. Sparman ignored Manny's taunt and addressed Flynn.

"I thought we might find her here," he said thoughtfully. "That would've made it simpler."

Flynn swore bitterly. He was a husky fellow and anger lined his big face. "Why don't I take a sock at this guy? Why don't we take him down to headquarters and put the screws on him? He'll talk."

"I doubt it." A frown slashed across Sparman's forehead. "And without the girl, he'd be out in twenty-four hours. Not even the cop could identify him—Maier's the only one he was sure of."

"That's a good story," taunted Manny, "stick to it."

Flynn grabbed the thin gunman by the throat. He spun him around and drew back a big fist.

Sparman snapped: "Don't mark him up. Put the cuffs on him." When Flynn obeyed, he continued. "We're pretty sure of one thing. Wherever this guy's partner is—the Borland girl'll be with him. We got some time; I'm gonna sit tight here and see what happens."

As he spoke, Sparman saw a brief flicker of fear cloud Manny's dark eyes. Then it was gone and he continued:

"You go back downstairs——"

"But——" interrupted Flynn, as a bewildered expression swept over his face.

"Listen!" snapped Sparman. "If this other bird comes here, he'll come from the girl. I want to know *how* he comes. If they've hidden her near by, he'll be walking. In that case, nab him or follow him upstairs.

"But if he comes in a taxi—— I'll be sitting by the window. I'll see the cab and be ready for him. Your

job'll be to let him come up, but grab that taxi. We want to know where he comes from.

Manny laughed very sarcastically. "You think of things, don't you?"

Sparman sneered. He pushed a chair up to the window, pulled Manny over by the wall so that he could watch him as well as the street below, and motioned Flynn from the room. He heard the door close behind him as he settled himself to wait.

JUST how long he sat there, Sparman didn't know. He saw Flynn come out on the pavement and take his station in the opposite areaway. He held his gun on his handcuffed captive, but his eyes were almost constantly on the street.

"Drop it!"

Sparman froze. For an instant he hesitated. The voice came from the apartment door behind him, and there was death in the tone. He let the gun slide from his hand and turned around.

The pale-eyed, white-faced youth who had jumped his cab, stood in the open doorway. The automatic in his hand was steady and his lips were curved in a gloating grin.

"Nice goin', Sam," Manny approved.

Sam said, "Yeah," carelessly, then, "But what the hell kind of a game is this?"

Manny told briefly what had happened. "We got to scram. This guy's got ideas and it's the heat for us if we don't put him out."

He looked at the handcuffs on his wrist and said: "Your pal's got the keys, copper. Call him up here."

Sparman got up from his chair and watched the two gunmen with bleak eyes.

Manny said: "Get behind the door, Sam. When the dick comes in the room, crack down on him with your rod. He's just a dumb cop. When he wakes up he won't know what it's all about. And that'll clear the front door. Then we'll take this wise guy for a ride. He knows too much to be runnin' around loose."

Manny grinned. Sam circled around behind the motionless Sparman and jammed the gun in the small of his back.

"Call that dick up here," he rapped. "And if you pull anything screwy you'll get a back full of lead."

Sparman pulled the curtain aside and whistled. He saw Flynn come out from the areaway and start across the pavement. A harsh laugh of triumph sounded in his ears from behind him. Sam jabbed the gun in his back and pushed him away from the window toward the center of the room.

Sparman stood with his hands hanging loosely at his sides; every muscle in his lean body was tensed and ready for action. For the second time that evening he was in a jam.

His muscles set. He spun sidewise and half twisted his body to the right. Then the stab of hot lead slashed across his ribs as the roar of the gun filled the room. Then his hands were on the gun.

He jerked the gun to one side as it roared again. Flame scorched his wrist. The fingers of his left hand twisted the gun away from his body. He cocked his right hand and hooked the fist flush to the astonished's Sam's jaw. The man's knees sagged. Sparman jerked the gun from nerveless fingers just as Manny's body crashed into him, hurtled him to the floor.

He rolled to one side and was on his knees covering the handcuffed,

wild-eyed Manny when Flynn burst into the room.

An incredulous look flooded the big detective's face. His mouth gaped, he gulped and stammered:

"What—where'd this other guy come from?"

Sparman ignored the question. "Take the bracelets off this fella," he rapped. "Cuff the two of 'em together." He felt gingerly of his side. He could feel the warm trickle of blood inside his shirt, but he was not seriously injured. The slug had only dug a furrow along his ribs.

He strode across the room to the telephone as Flynn handcuffed the cursing Manny to the wrists of the still unconscious Sam. A moment later he had his number and was barking staccato commands into the mouthpiece:

"I want a squad car—about four men. Get a warrant for Maier's apartment. Be there in a half hour and pick up Captain Farrel on the way. . . . No, you won't have to sneak in. Give him the siren when you pull in front of his place. Bust right in on him. There's a man at the back door."

SPARMAN looked at his watch —eleven fifty. He glanced over at the smiling Flynn, who sat in the big chair in the center of the room and covered the two glowering gunmen.

"It's about time for the pay off—if I'm right," he said. He took out his gun, spun the cylinder and cuddled it in his hand. "Take a look in the hall, Flynn," he continued. "See if you can find a ladder out there."

Flynn looked surprised and said: "I looked out there the first time I came up. There was no ladder out there then."

"I know," grunted Sparman. "But that was then; this is now. Take a look."

Flynn left the room and came back a moment later with his eyes popping. "What the hell!" he said. "That ladder wasn't out there——"

Sparman grinned. "Watch these two birds!" he rapped. "I got things to do."

He left the room and found the ladder in the back of the hall. He carried it to the skylight, propped it against the casing, and soon was standing on the flat roof.

There was no moon, but chimneys and radio aërials made weird silhouettes against the clear sky. Farther downtown lights winked at him.

The gravel on the roof crunched noisily under his feet as he walked to the rear of the house and peered down on the three-story building opposite. Below, in the alley, he made out the shadowy form of Cotton.

Then a flash of light from a rooftop off to the left caught his eyes. He crouched behind a chimney and glued his eyes on the spot. For several seconds he could make out nothing, then he saw a dark blotch moving hurriedly toward him—on the other side of the alley.

The blotch took shape, became a man carrying a sacklike burden on his shoulder. The man stopped at the edge of a roof and put down his burden. He picked up a plank and slid it out across the alley to the roof of the apartment adjoining the one where Sparman waited.

Sparman's nerves tingled as the man again picked up his burden. He caught his breath and held it as he watched the short, perilous dash over that plank. Then the man was coming toward him.

The fellow gained the edge of the roof where Sparman waited. There

was a two-foot rise. The man cleared it with surprising agility. Sparman saw the set of the shoulders, the long arms, the neckless head. Louis Maier moved steadily toward him.

Sparman slipped his .38 from his pocket. Then he saw a brief flash of blue steel from Maier's right hand. His lips tightened and he hugged the chimney. The steps became louder. He could hear Maier's labored breathing. Then the man slipped past, three feet from the chimney.

Sparman took one long step. His left hand shot out and fastened on Ruth Borland's shoulder. He yanked the unconscious girl toward him.

Maier staggered, cursed in surprise. The girl's body slipped from his shoulder. Sparman saw the man recover and whirl toward him. He thrust the girl away, let her body slip to the roof as his finger squeezed the trigger.

The shots seemed to roar in unison. Yet Sparman knew his own shot was a watch tick ahead. This time there was no shock of hot lead —just a quick twitch at the collar of his coat.

SPARMAN grinned at Captain Farrel while the ambulance interne strapped up his side, fifteen minutes later.

"There's not much more to tell," he said. "I located these birds by some licorice drops and that identification card the girl dropped.

"But I was still fogged up about where she was until this guy, Sam, stuck me up. That made it easy. I knew he didn't walk in downstairs —Flynn would've got him; he didn't come in a taxi. There was only one other way: Over the roofs. And why?

"A hunch told me he came from Maier's and that the girl was with him. It was a swell idea. He'd been watched all day, hadn't left the house or had any callers. It was a cinch no one would look for the girl there when he hadn't even been out.

"That's where they took her when they snatched her from me. They had a plank on each side of the place where they crossed the alley so they could move either way. They had a ladder on this side. And the reason I didn't find it at first was because Sam had pulled it up to the roof when he went to Maier. When he came he brought it in."

Sparman felt of the bandage at his side and slipped on his shirt. "I could've gone over the roofs to Maier. But I was afraid for the girl. If I crowded him he might've knocked her off.

"So I thought I'd give him a chance to run for it. I figured he'd have time to bring her over here after he heard your squad car out front—bring her over here and get back before you could break in his apartment." Sparman grinned. "And I guess he figured the same way."

Captain Farrel grunted. "A swell job—locating the two torpedoes," he said. "If you hadn't found 'em, Maier would've been set. But now" —Farrel cocked one eyebrow—"let's see how much riding these newspaper guys are gonna do. We got all three of the birds that shot the paymaster. And if Maier lives, we got our witness. As soon as she sleeps off that dope she'll be O. K."

Farrel rubbed his hands and a smile wrinkled the corners of his eyes as he turned to the plainclothes men at the door and said:

"All right. Send those reporters in. We'll give 'em something to chew on."

He had a gun but he never got to use it.

One-Buck Pay-Off

by George Harmon Coxe

Author of "Slay Ride," etc.

This was no job for a private dick, according to the cops, and particularly for the one who happened to be on the murder spot. But Ragan didn't see things that way. As long as his client could pay a retainer he considered himself hired, ready to give more than death-value on the dollar.

CHAPTER ONE

Death on the Sidewalk

THE taxi driver had already shifted into low, and when the orange of the traffic light turned to green he let out the clutch. The cab jerked ahead as the ancient gears ground protestingly. The driver glanced at the headlights bearing down on him from the right, then the glance became a stare of amazement. He yelled and stood on the brake pedal.

The cab slued to a stop, threw Ragan forward against the back of the front seat. A siren shrieked a brief warning and a small black sedan, the painted gold shield of the police department gleaming on the front door, crashed the red light, cut deftly around the front of the cab and continued down State Street with an even, undiminished roar.

The taxi driver had stalled the cab. Now he began to swear. "Those headquarters

dopes'll kill somebody yet," he growled. "Did you see the way—"

"Follow it!" Ragan pushed back on the seat. In the brief instant when the police car shot past the cab's headlights he had caught a quick glimpse of a pink, heavy-jowled face on the front seat beside the driver. Lieutenant Lohrke, homicide.

"Follow it, chump!" Ragan snapped again. "Or are we anchored?"

Recovered from his shock, the driver let out the clutch with a jerk, swung the wheel left and gave the accelerator a work-out. By the time he straightened out, the tail-light of the police car was nearly three blocks away. But from that point on the distance did not increase.

It was only eleven o'clock, but State Street, dipping gently down into the financial and business section of the city, was a deserted, drab-walled canyon. Life here was on an eight-hour day. Darkness gave it the quiet of a residential street.

Ragan, sitting on the edge of the seat with his feet flat on the floor, watched the tail-light swing right into Pearl Street. When the cab followed, the tail-light had stopped at the curb two blocks ahead in front of a row of three- and four-storied brick buildings that looked all black in the shadows.

Ragan told the driver to stop at the next corner. He swung out on the running board as the tires scraped against the curbing, thrust a dollar bill at the driver and continued on to the middle of the block on a dead run.

He slid to a stop beside a uniformed policeman, noticed that there were two police cars at the curb. Lieutenant Lohrke and two plainclothesmen, squatting on their heels and swearing in awed, hushed tones, stared down at the inert body of a man who lay sprawled in the middle of the six-foot sidewalk. Another body was crumpled in a narrow doorway that separated a small jewelry store and a stationery shop, and led to the offices above.

Ragan said: "I was on my way home from a show. Saw your car go—"

Lohrke sprayed the beam of his flashlight on the face of the man on the sidewalk, a face that was lean, long-jawed, freckled. Ragan choked on the rest of the sentence, stiffened, sucked in his breath.

"McCaffery!" he breathed. "My God!"

Lohrke looked up, swiveled the flashlight into Ragan's face, spoke something unintelligible. Then he stood up abruptly. "McCaffery—and Carlton," he said.

Ragan said: "Jim—Jim Carlton?" and spun toward the crumpled form in the doorway.

Lohrke caught his arm, jerked him back.

"This," he clipped out bitterly, "is no job for a private dick."

RAGAN didn't try to free his arm. He faced Lohrke, did not speak for a moment. His eyes were becoming accustomed to the darkness now. It was not as black as he thought. The sky was clear, starlit; the headlights from the headquarters car, and the yellow glow from the hallway of the ancient office building, spread through the doorway and cast a dim glow over the sidewalk. Lohrke's eyes were black pools in a thick face that now seemed sallow rather than pink.

"Cop killer?" Ragan asked in a low, flat voice.

Lohrke let go of the arm. He was a big man, Lohrke. Beefy, capable in a loud-voiced, blustering sort of way. His words now were curiously choked, throaty.

"You'd better beat it, Ragan. There'll be no client to give you a stand-in on this."

Hot anger was surging up through Ragan's veins. It took a tremendous mental effort to check his bitter retort. He glanced down at the man in the doorway. "I went to the police academy with Carlton," he said grimly. "We started out together."

"You're a private dick now."

"He was my friend, just the same," Ragan said.

He turned, saw that the two plainclothesmen were watching him. He knew them both, Grady and O'Dell. There was something in their manner that he could not diagnose. Shock from the deaths of brother officers—yes. But something more than that. Something awkward, almost shifty, masked their faces.

He turned back to Lohrke. "I'm in it now. I think I'll stay in. What's the stall?"

Lohrke's gaze was steady, but he did not speak.

"You can tell me or not, as you damn please," Ragan said, in tones that were hardened, yet curiously modulated. "But I'll get the set-up anyway and—"

"We don't know the set-up," Lohrke growled, "and we're afraid to find out." He inhaled noisily, spread his hands and let them slap against his thighs. "Carlton's got it in the right temple—a contact wound! His gun was a couple inches from his hand. It's been fired twice—and there's one slug in McCaffery—one in his heart. Looks like it's from Carlton's gun. There was talk of bad blood between 'em."

Ragan breathed a curse and leaned forward so that his nose was but inches from Lohrke's face.

"Why, you louse!" he snarled. "You stand there and tell me you think Carlton shot McCaffery, then killed himself just because they had an argument about a pinch last month!" He cursed once more, added: "I don't know McCaffery much, but I know Carlton. He never—"

"Am I thinking that because I want to?" Lohrke growled. His voice was nasty, threatening. "When this thing breaks in the papers—" He broke off, mouthed an oath. "I know how it'll look, and I knew Carlton, too. But, by Gawd, I'm scared as hell of what the examiner'll find."

SAM RAGAN turned away then, stepped to the curb. He was a tall man, but very thin, with a thinness that was deceptive. He seemed all legs, wrists deceptive. He seemed all legs, wrists and elbows. Yet, only his legs were really skinny. The rest of his weight was in his chest and shoulders and his bony fists packed a wallop because of the leverage and the flat-muscled torso. A wrestler might tie him into a pretzel; a boxer would have his troubles.

He moved slowly along the curb, his thin, high-cheekboned face lowered so that his long chin was on his chest. His black eyes were fixed thoughtfully on the pavement edge. The asphalt, newly sprinkled, glistened at the crown, and little pools of water nestled against the curbing.

He could hear Lohrke and Grady talking, but he did not know what they were saying. He was thinking about Carlton. Eight years ago they had started out together. They were rookies at Station 16. Ragan liked the game, but the regulations and red tape of the department irked him.

Then, after two years, Ragan's father had died, leaving him a little money. He had left the force, set himself up in business as a private detective. It had been a long pull, the past six years, but it had been worth it. He had a bit of a reputation, comfortable offices, and assistant, a stenographer.

Carlton, big, blond, blue-eyed with a good-natured, even disposition, had gone on with the force. Was a first-grade detective now. In business their paths seldom crossed, yet their friendship had en-

dured. Now . . . Ragan cursed bitterly, kicked at the curb. Carlton had never killed himself and—

Ragan's thoughtful eyes fastened on the envelope. It was about three feet from the spread-legged uniformed policeman, standing vertically against the wet curbing. Absently, his mind still fogged with thoughts of his friends, he picked it up. It was damp, dirty, and the stamp was tilted at a peculiar angle, as though it had been slapped on in a hurry.

Ragan read the address: *Frank Wilson, 317 Wayne Street.* He turned it over. The name meant nothing to him. He pivoted, his eyes still downcast, started back to Lohrke. Then he saw the splotch on the sidewalk.

QUICKLY thrusting the envelope into his coat pocket, he grunted softly and dropped to one knee, his hand darting to his vest pocket for the small flat flashlight. In the concentrated yellow rays the splotch was elliptical, about two inches long. He glanced up, saw that it was about three feet from McCaffery's body, and almost at the edge of the curb.

"Lohrke."

The lieutenant stepped to his side and Ragan said: "That's blood."

Lohrke bent down, inspected the clotting stain. "What of it?" he rasped. "Probably where McCaffery was shot. Probably took a step forward before he dropped."

Ragan started to speak, checked himself. He moved over to McCaffery's body. Lohrke had opened the man's vest and blood stained a three-inch area on the chest. But if there was any blood on the sidewalk, it was under the body.

Ragan straightened up, said: "Well, do I get the rest of the set-up before the examiner comes?"

Lohrke took a cigar from his pocket, thrust it into his thick-lipped mouth without even bothering to bite off the end.

"About twenty minutes ago some bird called in, said there were a couple guys loitering around the jewelry store. We don't know who called, but the fellow said he walked down the street about forty minutes ago, and the two guys were here; when he came back fifteen minutes later, they were still here."

Lohrke swiveled the cigar, crunched it between his teeth. "Carlton and McCaffery came out from Station Eight. The next thing we know, this guy"— Lohrke jerked a thumb at the uniformed policeman—"called in."

Lohrke spat out a curse and the end of his cigar. "We only got one chance to beat this murder and suicide gag. It coulda been a frame." He flipped his thumb to the doorway. "The Hunt Club's upstairs. Carlton and McCaffery pulled the raid last week."

Lohrke went on to give the details, but Ragan's mind, already familiar with them, raced on ahead. The Hunt Club was nothing but an elaborate set-up for the racing crowd. Occupying half of the second floor of the four-storied building, it was a sumptuously furnished hangout with direct wires to all race tracks.

The raid Carlton and McCaffery staged netted forty-one gamblers and the four men who ran the place. Two of them were big names in the gambling world. Five thousand dollars' worth of furnishings had been confiscated. The four men were out on heavy bail as third offenders.

Ragan turned abruptly, stepped around Carlton's body without looking at it, and went into the musty, dimly lighted hallway. The elevator cage had an "Out of Order" sign on it and Ragan looked at the office directory. The Hunt Club and a hairdressing place occupied the second floor. The third housed two dentists; an insurance man; two lawyers—E. C. Bar-

dell, a fellow, who, Ragan recalled, once faced disbarment proceedings for fixing a witness—and a shyster named Cohen. The fourth floor housed a mail-order establishment. Ragan swiveled his dark eyes up the ancient stairs, then went back to the sidewalk. Lohrke took up where he left off.

"It's either what it looks like," he growled, "and it coulda been—McCaffery and Carlton hated each other's guts. Or it's a plant, a frame, for revenge. We'll round up the four muggs that run that Hunt Club and see what they got to offer."

He stepped close to Ragan, as though just remembering his former warning. "But there's nothing in it for you and—"

"That's what you think." Ragan's voice was bitter. "Carlton was my friend. I don't need any dough for it—and I don't need any publicity. But get this. I don't give a good damn how it looks, Carlton didn't shoot himself. I knew him too well for that, knew his sister—"

Ragan broke off suddenly as the word formed on his lips. His sister! Blanche Carlton. Geez! Somebody'd have to tell her and—

He turned abruptly from Lohrke, stepped onto the pavement and started for the corner. The lieutenant went slack-jawed for a moment, finally said: "Hey! Where the hell you goin'?"

Ragan did not answer. He had his head down and he moved on in long, stiff-kneed strides until an automobile horn jarred his mind back to the moment. He looked up as a taxi purred slowly past. In the next instant his eyes fastened on a white, dark-eyed face pressed tight to the glass of a rear window. It was a woman's face—he could make out the mass of black hair that framed it—and she was staring at the tableau of death on the sidewalk.

CHAPTER TWO

317 Wayne Street

RAGAN found a taxi at the second corner. He stopped at a drug store for a pint of whisky, and fifteen minutes later he was knocking at the door of the apartment shared by Carlton and his sister.

He had to knock three times and wait several minutes before a woman's voice said: "Who is it?"

Ragan answered and the door opened, framing a tall, clear-skinned girl, who wore feathered mules and a green corduroy robe over her silk pajamas. Like her brother, she was blond, blue-eyed. Trim brows lifted in surprise and the full-lipped mouth curved in a doubtful smile.

"Why, Sam, what—"

"C'n I come in, Blanche?" Ragan interrupted, forcing a thin smile to his lips.

"Jim isn't in, but—" Blanche Carlton drew her corduroy robe tightly about her slender figure.

"It's you I want to see," Ragan said slowly.

The girl opened the door wide, stepped back. She was still smiling and she seemed about to speak again when her eyes fastened on Ragan's. The smile evaporated under the detective's grim, troubled stare; then her eyes narrowed worriedly.

Ragan dropped his gaze, shut the door. He'd been to the apartment several times and he crossed the room quickly, went to the kitchen and got a glass. When he came back to the living room he saw that the girl's face was somber, that there was a tautness about her lips that made them flat and colorless, as though she knew something was wrong and was afraid to ask.

Ragan took out the pint, broke the seal, unscrewed the cap.

"There's something wrong, Sam."

Blanche Carlton's voice was strained, low. "Something's happened. Something's happened to Jim."

Ragan poured out a small drink, kept his eyes on the glass. His voice got thick and shaky in spite of himself.

"Yeah," he said finally. "Drink this."

The girl pushed aside the glass. Her voice rose in pitch and her face blanched. "He's—is he—"

"Yes." Ragan said, and hated himself for his awkwardness. "He was shot tonight." He stepped close to the girl then as he saw her weave drunkenly. But she did not faint. She sobbed once, then the breath caught in her throat and he clamped his hands on her shoulders, gently pushed, lowered her into a chair.

He finally got her to take the whisky. And then he began to talk in a low monotone, making his sentences short and rapid, trying to keep the girl's attention. Under his persuasion she took another small drink of whisky, and he told her what had happened.

He could see her fight herself, marveled at the way she got control of her emotions. When she finally spoke, her voice was husky, quite faint.

"I knew it might happen some day," she whispered. "But it—it doesn't seem possible. I mean—" she broke off, took a breath. "But he didn't shoot himself and—"

"Of course, he didn't," Ragan said. "And that's why I'm gonna work on it. But the cops are funny. On a case like this, they don't want outsiders in on it. I want to work for you, Blanche; for myself, too. But for you so I'll have something to back me up if the police get tough.

"I'm a mugg to come here like this—when—" Ragan's long, bony face was white, miserable, as he watched the girl, but he concentrated on the issue, went on deliberately. "I've got to get started. Have you got a dollar?"

The girl nodded dumbly toward a handbag on the table. Ragan stepped over, picked it up. Opening it, he took out a dollar bill, looked at it a moment, then shoved it in his pocket.

"That'll do it," he said grimly, and moved toward the door. There were lots of things he wanted to say, but he couldn't find the words.

"I'll leave the whisky. Take some more if you can. Try and get some sleep and—"

Someone knocked on the door.

Ragan opened it, and Lohrke and Grady stepped into the room. Lohrke glanced at the girl, then at Ragan. His big face darkened with anger and his brown eyes got sharp and bitter.

"Have you talked her into hiring you?" he rasped.

"She'll need all the help she can get," Ragan said flatly. The muscles knotted at the corners of his lean jaws.

Lohrke glanced at the girl. She sat woodenly in the chair, staring at the floor. He leaned close to Ragan.

"So that's the kind of a snake you are? Ran out on me to get here first and do your chiselin'."

Anger streaked through Ragan's brain, tinged his face crimson and flared behind his narrowed lids. His long fingers flexed, drew into fists. He took one step toward Lohrke, then changed his mind. He stepped around him and moved into the outer hall without saying a word.

RAGAN had told his taxi to wait. When he climbed in he said, "Three Seventeen Wayne Street," and took the envelope from his pocket. He found the tonneau light, turned it on. He held the envelope up to the light, saw there was an enclosure and took it out.

It was a small, twice-folded sheet and the typewritten message was brief.

See me tonight between 10:30 and 11:00. I'll have it for you.

There was no date, no signature. He replaced the sheet, studied the envelope. The postmark was dated the day before, from the main post office. The name, Frank Wilson, meant nothing to Ragan, but he kept turning the words over and over in his head in a deliberate effort to make them mean something.

Wayne Street was only five blocks long, but there were three distinct sections in its length: business, residential, and—by the waterfront—tenement. 317 was in the middle, a down-at-the-heels, red brick apartment of four stories. There was a stone-trimmed doorway, built flush with the sidewalk, and double glass doors with the words, *The Saville,* in gilt paint. The pavement was bare except for a sedan parked farther down the street.

Ragan told the driver to wait and crossed to the dimly lighted entryway. Mail boxes set in a stuccoed wall told him that Frank Wilson had apartment 3-B. He climbed three steps, found the inner door unlocked and entered a small, musty foyer. The apartment was a walk-up and he climbed in the semi-darkness on stairs that had rubber stair-treads instead of carpet.

Low-watt bulbs, at the front and back of the third-floor hall, made the ends of the building clear-cut and threw a murky half-light over the area between. From some room at the rear a rhythmic, stentorian snore broke the quiet of the corridor in a weird, hollow sequence.

Apartment 3-B was at the front, on the left side. Ragan knocked at the thin-paneled door, waited several seconds; then he knocked again, louder this time, and reached for the ring of skeleton keys in his pocket. There was no sound save the rhythmic snoring which rose and fell in mocking regularity. Ragan selected one of the keys and turned the doorknob with his left hand. The door was unlocked.

He replaced the keys, pushed on into the blackness of the room. He half shut the door, slid one hand along the near wall, feeling for a light switch.

He did not see, did not really hear a thing. It was rather that he sensed the movement behind him as the door swung shut. He drew back, threw up a protecting arm instinctively. Another arm smashed down on his, then something hard slapped down on his head.

The blow staggered him, sliced pain through his brain; but he kept his feet and spun toward his unseen assailant. A straight left caught the top of a man's head and Ragan's right shot forward, his fingers clamping on a thick throat. Then another body came hurtling through the darkness from behind.

Ragan went to his knees with the man on his back. His fingers ripped from the thick neck. There was a throaty curse. The hard object swished through the air again, smacked down flush on Ragan's battered felt. He was unconscious when he hit the floor.

RAGAN lay motionless for some minutes after opening his eyes. He was on his back, and when he raised his head the throbbing shot a nausea through his stomach that he found difficult to overcome. He finally pushed himself to a sitting position. His dull eyes found, and fixed upon, the pale blue rectangles that were the room's two windows.

The street lights outside threw the brick facade of the building opposite into sharp relief. From his position on the floor he could make out a thin stretch of star-dotted sky above the line of the roof.

He pulled his knees in close to his body and glanced down at his wrist watch. The luminous dial told him it was 12:20. He had been unconscious for about fifteen minutes.

He began to curse in a soft, bitter monotone and got shakily to his feet. He started for the direction of the door, jerked to a rigid stop as he heard soft footsteps in the hall.

He held his breath and listened. A moment later a key began to scratch in the lock. His hand slipped quickly to his shoulder holster, came out with his automatic, and his lips drew back against his teeth in a grimace of satisfaction. The key continued to rattle in the keyhole, loudly, stubbornly, balking at the attempt to unlock a door that was already unlocked.

Ragan waited, motionless. He heard the knob turn. Then the door swung slowly open and a woman stood silhouetted against the light of the hall. Ragan did not move, but his gun was up. The woman stepped slowly across the threshold, shut the door.

She moved across the floor, stumbled over something and said, "Dammit," like a sharp exhalation. Then there was a click and the room was bathed in light.

Ragan was still smiling, but his eyes were squinting and blinking, with the rush of light. The woman stood with her hand on the switch of a floor lamp and her back was turned.

"Hello, sweetheart," Ragan said.

The woman spun about. Ragan's eyes stopped blinking and widened quickly. The woman—that face was the one he had seen pressed close to the taxi window on Pearl Street.

She was about thirty, of average height, but plump, wth black hair and eyes. Her face was squarish; the skin was sallow and the rouge stood out like fever spots. One hand flew to her throat and her elbow clamped to the front of her dress.

"Oh, you—what—" she began.

Ragan lowered the gun. But before he could speak the woman's frightened manner had changed to hysteria and anger. She charged directly at him, started to claw him.

"Where is he?" she wailed. "What have you done to him?"

Ragan slid the trigger guard of his gun over his index finger and caught her wrists. She began to kick and he cursed once, backed her roughly to a chair. When she went over into it, he dropped down in her lap, still hanging to her wrists.

For another moment the woman struggled furiously, but she made no progress against Ragan's grip and weight, and she quieted as suddenly as she had begun. Ragan stood up, backed off.

He studied the crumpled woman a moment, then let his eyes drift around the room. He saw, now, that the place was in utter chaos. Table drawers were on the floor, their contents strewn on top of them. Cushions of the davenport had been cast aside. Drawers, empty drawers, hung half out of the small desk in the corner; the rug had been rolled back at the edges.

"They didn't get it," he said absently.

"What?" the woman asked hollowly.

"I don't know. But they didn't get it. If they had they'd've stopped looking and some part of the room would've been untouched. But it ain't. This place has been searched, plenty."

THE woman said: "What did you do with Frank?"

"I haven't seen him; that's what I came here for." Ragan told of the assault, how he had been knocked out. "I want to know," he finished, "how you happened to be down on Pearl Street after those two cops got knocked off."

"I was looking for Frank. He said he'd be back at eleven fifteen. He didn't come and—"

"Who'd he go to see?"

"I don't know."

"Well, who the hell's Frank, anyway? What's he do? How long have you known him? Where do you fit?"

"We were going to be married tomorrow. I had dinner with him tonight. He was going down on Pearl Street and—"

She stopped abruptly and her lips tightened, as though she was afraid of what she might say until she knew how Frank Wilson was involved.

"What's your name?" Ragan snapped.

"Gladys—Gladys Wentworth. I work down at the Casa Grande."

Ragan watched the woman through narrowed lids and tried to find one logical answer to what had happened. She said: "How did you get here?" Her voice was hard now and she had control of her emotions. "How do you know Frank? How do you know he lived here?"

"I don't know him, sweetheart," Ragan said, and let his voice sound disgusted. "That's what I came here for. I want to talk to him, real bad."

With slow, deliberate movements, he took the soiled envelope from his pocket, held it up, then looked down at it. "I found this down on Pearl Street—near those murdered—"

Ragan was totally unprepared for the effect of his words. It was his own fault, in a way. Over-confidence. How could he figure the dame had a .25 automatic in her handbag? But she did, and she got it out while he was looking down at the envelope. When he lifted his eyes, he stared smack into the tiny muzzle.

She came to her feet slowly. "Drop it!" she snapped.

Ragan saw the look in the black eyes, and he obeyed. He had seen that look before, and he knew that, on the edge of hysteria as she was, she was more dangerous than a professional killer. Because he could not figure her, and he was too far away to try action, he let his arms drop, let the automatic slide from his crooked finger.

"He had that letter tonight." Gladys Wentworth began to back toward the door. "He showed me the envelope. I know—from the way that stamp was put on. Where is he? Where'd you get it?"

"I already told you," Ragan answered nonchalantly. He took a step forward.

"Stop!" The woman's trigger finger tensed and Ragan stopped. He continued to smile.

"All I want is a chance to talk to Frank and—"

"You lie!" the woman hissed. "I know what you want—why this room was searched."

She backed to the door, reached behind her and opened it. She was frightened now, but still dangerous. "Stick your nose out," she said, "and I'll let you have it."

The door closed.

Ragan took two steps forward, his thin face grimly amused. Then he swerved abruptly, stepped to one of the two windows overlooking the street. Opening it, he whistled. The second time, his driver got out of the taxi and looked up.

"There's a dame coming out," Ragan called down. "Follow her, find out where she goes. Wait for me at police headquarters."

CHAPTER THREE

The Third Death

RAGAN picked up his automatic, slipped it into his holster and began to search through the littered room. There were a few love letters, signed "Gladys"; some bills, magazines, folders of matches; a box of plain white stationery. None of these things interested Ragan. After a few minutes, he con-

tinued on to the bedroom of the apartment.

Here too, the dresser drawers had been dumped on the floor. Clothing was strewn everywhere; the bed had been pulled apart, the pillows shaken from the pillow-slips. Ragan pawed through the assortment of underwear, socks and handkerchiefs. Tangled up in a pair of tan shorts, he found half a dozen snapshots.

Four of these were views of the harbor and beach; one was of Gladys Wentworth in a bathing suit. The final snapshot brought a grunt from Ragan's throat. As he continued to study it, his lips pursed and he began to whistle a tuneless melody.

The picture showed a man and a woman in bathing suits, their arms around each other's waists. The woman was Gladys Wentworth; the man was scrawny, spindle-legged. He was no taller than the girl and his body was all straight lines and angles. His hair was straight, and on end, as though he had just finished a swim.

Ragan said, "Tony Avellar," softly and thrust all the snapshots in his pocket.

He turned off the bedroom light, went back through the living room and downstairs to the dimly lighted entryway. The last mail box in the long row had a card tacked at the bottom that said, *Janitor.* Ragan pushed the button, held it with his thumb for several seconds.

He lit a cigarette, alternately puffed and pressed the buzzer button. In about five minutes a tall, stooped man with a bald head emerged from behind the main staircase. He wore a long-sleeved undershirt, trousers and carpet slippers. He was muttering angrily when he opened the door, but Ragan did not give him a chance to speak.

He took out the snapshot of the two on the beach, stepped close to the janitor, handed him the picture. At the same time he took a dollar bill from his pocket and held it loosely.

"You know this guy?" he asked crisply.

The janitor squinted at the picture, scowled up at Ragan. "A hell of a fine time it is," he grumbled, "to come askin' such—" His eyes found the dollar bill and he stopped abruptly. His jaw twisted slightly and he rubbed his chin, said, "Yeah."

"Got an apartment here?"

"Yeah. Frank Wilson, his name is."

"How long's he been here?"

The janitor began to scowl again. "Three months. Mebbe more, mebbe less."

"What's he do?"

"How should I know? He pays his rent prompt, that's what interests me."

"You're sure this is Frank Wilson?"

"Didn't I say so?" The janitor snapped this petulantly and grabbed for the dollar bill. Ragan made no attempt to hold it. His long face cracked in a grin and he turned without answering and moved to the street door. The janitor glared after him, took a hitch in his trousers and slammed the inner door.

THE taxi driver was waiting when, twenty minutes later, Ragan got out of another cab in front of headquarters.

"How'd you make out?" Ragan said. "Follow her all right?"

"I didn't have to." The driver, a short, freckle-faced fellow with glasses, began to grin. "She hopped right into my cab when she came out."

"What's the address?"

"Six Eighty-nine Monroe Street—on the south side."

Ragan jotted down the address on a card, slipped it into his vest pocket. "Just after I went in that apartment," he said, "two guys came out. What'd they look like?"

The driver scratched his head. "One

was a big bruiser with a black felt hat; the other was a little guy. I can't remember much, but—"

"Where'd they go?"

"They got in that sedan down the street. I think there was a guy waiting for 'em."

Ragan grunted. "O. K. I'm not through yet, but I'll pay you now—or you can wait."

"I'll wait," the driver said.

Ragan climbed the worn stone steps of police headquarters, swung through the bronze doorway and turned left into a long hall on the first floor. At the far end he pushed open a door marked, *Telegraph Bureau.*

A teletype was chattering and a fellow in uniformed trousers and shirt sleeves was battering a typewriter in one corner of the room. Beyond a glass partition an announcer was speaking silently into a microphone. Ragan spoke to the sergeant behind the massive roll-top desk.

"You got anything new on Tony Avellar, Mike?"

Mike, a beetle-browed Irishman, clasped his hands behind his thick neck and cocked one eyebrow at Ragan.

"What," he asked, "would guys like you do without guys like me to answer your questions?"

Ragan grinned, lit a cigarette and offered one to Mike. It was refused. When he spoke his tone was humorous and did not betray his intense interest.

"Is it a secret?"

"No," Mike drawled.

"You got him here? Is he where I can talk with him?"

"He ain't here, and you can't talk with him," Mike said, grinning. "But you can talk *to* him—talk your head off. He's in the morgue."

"Morgue?" Ragan burst out. "When—"

"That's the funny part of it. That's what makes me wonder about guys like you. We only got word ten minutes ago. And now you come bustin' in all het up about him. Does he owe you dough?"

The last was lost on Ragan. He called, "Much obliged, Mike," and was through the doorway before the sentence was finished.

Flynn, a pensioned veteran, was on duty at the morgue. Ragan knew him well. He found him playing two-handed pinochle with a man from the *Star.* He waited until the hand was finished, then got Flynn to one side. He told him what he wanted and Flynn led him down a cool, tiled corridor that smelled of formaldehyde. They went into a small room on the right and Flynn turned on the light. A sheet-covered form lay on a wheeled table; Flynn apologized for its presence.

"We ain't had time to put him away yet," he said.

Ragan pulled the sheet from the man's face. It was a thin, blue-white mask and the eyes were closed. He pulled the sheet down to the waist. There were two bluish holes in the scrawny chest: one on the left side near the heart; the other diagonally lower on the other side of the body.

THIS picture had little in common with the scene Ragan had witnessed earlier. If he felt any emotion at the sight of the lifeless body of Tony Avellar, he was not conscious of it. Avellar was a chiseler, a rat. Formerly a small-time crook, he had for the past year been driving a taxi. He had a police record for numerous petty offenses and his last appearance had happened four months before.

At that time a jury foreman had been mysteriously murdered. Avellar, driving a taxi at the time, had been nearby. He was picked up by the police, grilled, held for nearly a month as a material witness

while they tried to find the killer. But Avellar had finally been released on a thousand dollars bail, and he had not been seen since.

Ragan jerked his thoughts back to the present, shrugged. "Help me turn him over," he said. "I want to see if—"

Flynn jerked the sheet back over the face, grunted impatiently. "I'll tell you without looking. One slug came out; the other is still in him."

"Lohrke see him?"

"No."

"Where'd they find him? A ride?"

"Yeah. Dumped out at the side of the road near the railroad yards—out Readville way."

"Just come in, huh?" Ragan turned toward the door, stopped with one hand on the jamb. "Examiner didn't recover the slug in him yet, huh?"

Flynn sighed and turned out the light. "I guess not. And now will you get the hell out of here? It ain't often I can get a guy at this time of night that'll play pinochle."

The man from the *Star* buttonholed Ragan when he came back to the rotunda, but Ragan stalled, kidded a moment or so and then stepped to one of the two telephone booths near the entrance. It took him nearly five minutes to get his number. Then the sleepy voice of Todd, Ragan's assistant, mumbled a thick "Hello."

"I got a job for you," Ragan said.

"Who the hell're you?"

"Me—Ragan, you cluck."

"Oh—when?"

"Now."

"My Gawd," Todd moaned, his voice wide awake now. "How about my sleep?"

"How about mine?" growled Ragan. He hesitated, grinning wryly while Todd worked out his string of curses. Then he added, "It's two o'clock now—and it's my turn to sleep."

He went on in short clipped sentences to tell Todd what had happened, about the murder of McCaffery and Carlton, about Avellar. Todd was eager with interest when Ragan finished.

"What do I do?"

"Get a flashlight and go down on Pearl Street. I got a hunch that some place around there you'll find a slug."

"The one that went through Avellar?"

"Yeah."

"And all I got to do," Todd said drily, "is to find it some place in that block?"

"That's all," Ragan said. "But it won't be as hard as it sounds. It's probably pretty close to that doorway—number Four Fifty-eight."

"It'll be hard," growled Todd, "even the way you tell it. What do I do if I find it?"

"Take a run down to my apartment and wake me up. One of us might as well be sleeping."

Ragan grinned and hung up on the newly released series of curses. If there was a slug, Todd would find it. Of that he was sure.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Missing Slug

RAGAN let Todd in his apartment at eight the next morning. He had just finished his shower. As he opened the door he was a tall gaunt figure in a blue bathrobe, black hair touseled, his dark skin fresh and shiny from his shave.

Todd came into the comfortably furnished living room, crossed to the divan without a word and flopped down upon it. Physically he was the exact opposite of Ragan. Short, round-bodied with straw-colored hair, blue eyes and glasses. His suit, rounded by his body, had no press; his brown felt was shapeless.

"How's for a drink?" he asked.

Ragan went to the kitchenette, got a

bottle of Scotch, half filled, a glass and a siphon. He knew from Todd's attitude that the little man had found what he went after. And thinking about it, he was glad Todd worked for him. One of these days, he'd make him a partner. He'd hired him as an office boy. And with no training Todd had, in two years, become invaluable in routine investigations.

Ragan went back to the living room. Todd reached for the bottle and glass, said, "Never mind the fixings," and poured out an inch and a half of whisky. He downed it in one gulp, lit a cigarette and settled back on the divan.

For a few moments, Ragan did not speak. His mind, working with a machine-like precision, was reviewing the case as he saw it. He put together each bit of information at his command.

He did not have many answers yet, but he had more than a good start. The letter, leading him to Frank Wilson—Tony Avellar—had been a break, pure and simple. If he had not arrived at Pearl Street just when he did Lohrke would eventually have found that envelope.

That bloodstain on the sidewalk was what really started his hunch, though. Lohrke, angry, vengeful at the sight of the two murdered policemen, had let his mind get balled up. That bloodstain was not from McCaffery. Ragan had been sure of that at the time. McCaffery had not bled enough for that, not enough to make that two-inch splotch before he fell.

Ragan thought he knew now where the blood had come from—Avellar. But it would take the missing slug to prove it. If it checked. . . . But why had Avellar gone to 458 Pearl Street? Who was he after? Or was it just a gag to put him on the spot? Even if this idea hooked up it did not explain how McCaffery and Carlton—

"Well," Todd growled in interruption, "there it is." He tossed a partly flattened lead slug on the table. "And I only just found it. All night I look. Then I find it way back in the hall of Number Four Fifty-eight—in the fifth step of those stairs."

Ragan picked up the bullet, turned it over and over in his hand. Sucking thoughtfully on his lower lip, he crossed to the telephone near the door and asked for police headquarters.

"Hello, Lohrke," he said a few seconds later. "Ragan. Yeah. Did you recover that slug from Avellar's body. . . ? You did, but you been busy on that cop-killer thing? Sure. . . . I ain't seen the papers yet, but get this. I think I got the other slug that burned Avellar. I'll be down after while."

LOHRKE, a cigar stub jutting from clamped jaws, was pacing back and forth across his office when Ragan entered. Two newspapers were spread across his desk and Ragan stepped over, glanced at the headlines. It was all there, just as Lohrke had feared.

TWO POLICEMEN SLAIN
WITH OFFICER'S GUN

Ragan's mouth took on a tautness that curved his thin lips in a weird smile. He read quickly down the page until he came to a paragraph that began—

> But the physical circumstances also sup- the theory that Carlton killed McCaffery and then shot himself in a sudden fit of insanity or anger. There has been some talk of bad blood between the two men, and Carlton was an excellent marksman. The wound in his head was a contact wound, meaning the gun was pressed against his temple. . . .

Ragan swore bitterly. He thumbed quickly through the pages of the newspaper, scanning them briefly. He found

what he wanted on Page 12. Avellar's death got two paragraphs.

Lohrke stopped pacing and strode angrily to his desk. "What's this about the other slug that got Avellar?"

Ragan took it from his pocket and passed it to the lieutenant. "Have it checked. If it's from the same gun as the slug in his body I'll tell you where I got it."

Lohrke, grumbling, got on the telephone and summoned the ballistic expert. It was not until the expert had left with the bullet that the lieutenant spoke again to Ragan.

"I don't think it matters a damn one way or the other," he said then. "I thought you were working for Blanche Carlton?"

"You ought to know," snapped Ragan angrily. "You popped off about it, didn't you?"

Lohrke's pink face reddened. He sat down and wiped a hand over the top of his head, which was bald nearly to the crown. When he spoke the red crept up into this bald lane.

"She told me the deal you made," he said awkwardly. "About the dollar. That crack I made—well, hell. You know I ain't got anything against you. But I was—"

Ragan went back to a chair and collapsed into it like a folding card table. "I told you," he said evenly, picking up the newspaper again. "I told you down on Pearl Street I wasn't in this thing for the dough or publicity."

He stretched his long legs, surveyed the tips of his oxfords. "But I was a cop long enough to hate cop killers—and Carlton was my friend."

"You got something," Lohrke accused. "Spill it."

"If I did, it would gum up your idea that the racetrack crowd was mixed up in it."

Lohrke took the cigar that was now two inches tobacco pulp and one inch cigar, from his mouth. He spat once, jammed the pulp back into his mouth, and said: "It's already gummed. Everyone of those four guys Carlton and McCaffery pulled are clean as a whistle." He hesitated, glared at Ragan. "But hell, it's gotta either be murder and suicide like the coroner's jury's gonna make out, or it was a frame.

"Some guy called in about the jewelry store, some guy that knew McCaffery and Carlton would go out on it. Nobody could pull Carlton's gun on him—he musta been stuck up and—"

The ballistic expert stuck his nose in the door.

"The slug checks with the one we got from Avellar. Do you want I should keep it?"

Ragan turned in the chair. "Yeah. Label it and keep it."

The ballistic man withdrew.

"Now," snapped Lohrke, "where did you get it?"

"Todd found it," Ragan said. He took out a cigarette. "Found it in the stairs in the back hall of Number Four Fifty-eight."

"How'd he know where to look?" Lohrke's eyes narrowed suspiciously.

"I told him about it."

"You—" He stopped, seeming to have run out of words.

RAGAN slouched in the chair, lit his cigarette, and held up the newspaper, talking as he read. "I found an envelope . . ." he began. Then he told Lohrke of his trip to the address on Wayne Street, of what happened there and what he found.

As he was finishing his story, Ragan's eye caught in the newspaper a sentence that jerked him erect in the chair. The sentence read—

The owners of the Hunt Club have retained attorney E. C. Bardell to defend them.

Ragan threw the newspaper aside, picked up a telephone book and scribbled down an address on a slip of paper. "My Gawd," he choked. "Am I dumb?" He pulled his hat down, jerked to his feet.

Lohrke, his mouth gaping, said: "Where are you going?"

"I'm gonna have a talk with this Gladys Wentworth. Wanta come?"

Lohrke hesitated. Ragan's lip curled and he blew a jet of smoke up past the end of his nose. "Or maybe," he sneered, "you don't like the company; maybe it would hurt your reputation to be seen with a private dick."

"It ain't that, only—"

Ragan moved toward the door. "I've played it this far alone. I guess I can finish it."

Lohrke cursed and got to his feet. He moved to a clothes-tree, snatched off his hat.

"You'd better bring a gun," Ragan said.

"For the dame?"

"She's only the first act."

Lohrke went back to his desk, opened the center drawer and took out his service revolver. He slipped it in his hip pocket and the two men went out.

SIX EIGHTY-NINE Monroe was a slate-colored frame building in the middle of a drab, uninviting block. Judging by the style of architecture in evidence, the neighborhood had, at one time, been rather a fashionable one. Now it was definitely third class and most of the houses had "Rooms To Let" signs in first-floor windows.

Ragan and Lohrke went up the wide wooden steps, rang the bell. A plump, red-faced woman with stringy hair and an orange wrapper answered the ring.

"Does Gladys Wentworth live here?" Ragan asked.

"Yes."

"She in?"

"No."

"When'll she be back?"

"I don't know, I'm sure." The woman shrugged indifferently. "She went out with two men about ten minutes ago, and—"

Ragan stiffened. "One of 'em big, with a dark hat and—"

"Yes."

Ragan spun about and took Lohrke by the arm. The lieutenant's voice was sardonic. "Annie doesn't live here any more."

Ragan began to swear, but he did not speak. They got into the taxi. "Four Fifty-eight Pearl Street," Ragan directed.

"She run out on you." Lohrke's voice was bitter. "You shoulda come out here last night—or told me about it."

"I thought she'd keep," Ragan snapped.

"You knew she'd see about Avellar in the papers—"

"She didn't know Avellar. He was Frank Wilson to her. But I clean forgot that those hoods might have known about her."

"The two that slugged you last night?"

"Yeah," growled Ragan. "It looks like we go to work." His manner had nothing of the easy nonchalance shown in Lohrke's office. His thin lips were tight and his eyes were smoldering. "Now I know I'm right."

"Well," said Lohrke impatiently. "Spill it!"

Ragan's voice was harsh, bitter. "You said it was murder and suicide, or else a plant."

"What else could it be?"

"An accident."

"Accident?" Lohrke was incredulous. "Don't tell me—"

"Listen. The guy that phoned in about

the jewelry store was on the level. It was a tip. Two guys *were* hanging around that entrance—the two hoods that jumped me. But they were waiting for Avellar and—"

"Geez!" interrupted Lohrke, stiffening on the seat. "Then you were right about that blood on the sidewalk. You mean they gave him the slug and right after that, before they could load him in a car, McCaffery and Carlton came up and—"

"That's the idea," said Ragan grimly. "But it ain't all of it. If it was, those two hoods woulda opened up on Carlton and McCaffery. But they didn't. Whoever figured out this murder and suicide gag had brains. It was no cheap hood that doped that out.

"Remember that jury foreman that got knocked off four months ago? Well, suppose Avellar *had* seen it. Suppose he was doin' a bit of blackmailin'. He was a rat anyway, and that letter I found sounds like it. 'I'll have it for you tonight.'"

"But—" Lohrke began.

"Gawd," Ragan snorted, "I was dumb. Who was the defense lawyer in that case where the foreman got murdered?"

"Bardell—Ed Bardell."

Ragan took out the slip of paper he had used to jot down the number he had taken from the telephone book in Lohrke's office. But Lohrke did not look at it.

"Hell!" he wheezed. "Bardell's office is at Four Fifty-eight Pearl Street. I knew that, but I never hooked it up—"

"Yeah," Ragan said dryly. "And what did those two hoods want in Avellar's place last night? Your guess is as good as mine. There musta been other letters. But they didn't find 'em. That girl must have 'em."

The taxi eased to a stop on Pearl Street. Lohrke paid the driver and started for the entrance to 458. Ragan grabbed him.

"No. You wait across the street. If I come out with Bardell—"

"To hell with that," snapped Lohrke. "I'm goin' up and—"

"You're a cop," barked Ragan. "We aint got enough proof for you to work on Bardell. He's a lawyer and he might have you up before the trial board. But me"— Ragan thumped his chest—"I'm only a private dick. I got no badge to lose. He might get me for assault, but I can stand it." He pushed Lohrke off the curb, spun about and went through the narrow entrance and up the wooden stairs.

Bardell's office was at the end of the third-floor corridor, a narrow, stuffy hall whose ancient floorboards creaked protestingly with Ragan's passing weight. He slipped his automatic from his holster, transferred it to his coat pocket. Then he opened the door.

Bardell, his back turned, was talking on the telephone. He apparently heard the door open. "Wait for me," he said. He hung up, and brushed something on the desk in front of him into an open drawer. At one end of the desk, in a leather-upholstered arm chair, sat Gladys Wentworth.

CHAPTER FIVE

Pay-off

GLADYS WENTWORTH jerked up in her chair and stared at Ragan with eyes that were wide and frightened. Her face was very pale, and white-knuckled hands gripped the chair arms.

Bardell turned slowly in his swivel chair. He was a shrewd-looking man of about forty with sleek brown hair, a tiny mustache, and a well tailored, expensive-looking checked suit. His gray-green eyes fastened on Ragan, narrowed shiftily.

"Well," he drawled. "What do you want?"

Gladys Wentworth spoke in a low, strained voice. "That's the man I told you about."

Bardell's jaw went slack for a moment, but he recovered himself quickly, wet his lips. "So you're one of those hoods that calls himself a private dick, huh?"

Ragan moved easily around the desk, his hand still in his pocket. He spoke to the woman.

"Maybe you're collectin' for Frank." He hesitated, trying to figure a logical answer. The woman, her attitude last night, made him feel that she had been on the level about Avellar. He did not think she knew of his death. His guess was that Bardell had cooked up a plausible story to tell her and get her out of town. He decided to gamble that his hunches were correct.

"You had those other letters, huh?" he asked. The woman did not answer and her eyes shifted anxiously to Bardell.

"Get out, Ragan," the lawyer said.

Ragan moved to the girl, his lanky height towering over her. "Where's Frank?"

"He had to leave town." This sullenly.

"Hah," Ragan jerked. "And he was doing some work for Bardell here, maybe, and Bardell is going to pay you—"

Bardell had reached for the telephone. Ragan, leaning quickly toward him, slapped the instrument from his hand. He took the snapshots out of his pocket, told the woman where he found them.

"Is this a shot of you and Frank Wilson?" he asked. Gladys Wentworth nodded and Ragan laughed grimly. "To you Frank Wilson—to the cops, Tony Avellar."

"I don't know what you mean."

"His right name was Tony Avellar."

"I don't care what his name was," the woman said defiantly. "We're going to be married and—"

"That's what you think." Ragan reached across the desk and snatched up a copy of the morning *Call*. He spread it open at Page 12. Keeping his eyes alternately on Bardell and the newspaper, he pointed to the two paragraphs about Avellar's death. He meant to break the news brutally in the hope that the effect would make the girl turn on Bardell.

"You're boy friend's in the morgue," he snapped, "and Bardell put him there!"

Gladys Wentworth screamed, and went over against the desk in a dead faint. Bardell's hand snaked to a desk drawer. He had a gun in his hand by the time Ragan reached him, but he never used it.

The detective knocked the gun hand against the edge of the desk. He jerked Bardell from the chair and then smashed his fist flush to Bardell's mouth. The lawyer went over backward.

Ragan stepped closer. Bardell staggered to his feet and the detective grabbed him, pulled him close. "You oughta be glad it's me and not a real cop," he snarled. "To a cop, you're a cop killer. To me"— Ragan lost control of his voice and emotions, shouted the words—"all you did was murder one of my best friends."

He punctuated the sentence with a right hook that started from his hips. The shock in his forearm as his fist smashed to Bardell's chin, shook him clear to the shoulder. Bardell stiffened and went forward on his face.

RAGAN began to curse in a soft, bitter voice. He knew he still lacked some proof, but he was sure he was right, and he was counting on the girl.

He opened the center desk drawer. There was a stack of crisp, new twenty-dollar bills; beneath them four letters in envelopes like the one he had found last night. He put them on the desk, then pushed the girl back into the chair. She

opened her eyes then, and he told her what he knew of the story.

Bardell began to stir on the floor.

"All his life," Ragan continued to the girl, "Bardell's been fixing juries—or trying to fix 'em—bribe witnesses. Probably the foreman of that one jury was going to spill what he knew. All you got to do is tell the truth—but you can stretch it a bit if you want. Bardell'll like that. You want to get the man that murdered Avellar, don't you?"

Gladys Wentworth nodded dumbly. Ragan stepped to a typewriter desk, slipped a piece of paper in the machine, tapped off a sentence. He studied it for a moment, said: "It checks all right, Bardell. That machine wrote all these letters. It's as good as your signature."

He went back to the desk, picked up the money and letters, shoved them in his coat pocket. Then he jerked Bardell to his feet.

"Let's go," he growled. "Over to your apartment. If we wait long enough those two hoods might show up."

They went down the hall and started down the stairs. Bardell was about a foot in the lead and Ragan followed, the gun in his pocket, the girl at his side.

THE ground-floor hall was deserted; a sliver of morning sunlight slid through the street entrance and made a yellow slash along one drab wall. Past the frame of the doorway pedestrians scurried along; beyond them an intermittent line of cars and taxis rolled slowly in the street. Bardell stepped through the doorway, Ragan and the girl just behind.

Ragan had one foot on the sidewalk when he saw the car at the curb, the man at the wheel—and leaning against the front fender, the big man with the black felt hat. His right hand was in his pocket.

In that instant, before Bardell yelled, Ragan knew what the lawyer had meant when he hung up the telephone. "Wait for me." Not at his apartment, but right here, with an automobile.

"Get him—and the girl!"

The words ripped from Bardell's throat and at the same moment he leaped aside, for the entrance to the stationery store.

Ragan ignored him. He saw the big man's gun glint in the sunlight; then his own gun was out. He reached out with his left, made a flat-hand swipe that caught the girl on the side of the head and knocked her sprawling toward Bardell. A woman screamed. Men began to curse. The pedestrians on the sidewalk scattered. Then the guns roared.

Ragan fired a fraction of a second ahead of the big man, and his hand was very steady. He saw the fellow's body jerk an instant before the gun whipped up in recoil. Ragan felt the slug rip across the inside of his left arm, but knew it did not strike a bone because there was little jar.

He squeezed the trigger again and pivoted toward the man in the front seat of the sedan. This fellow had little chance. He got his gun out, but cramped there on the seat, he lacked the freedom for proper aim. He fired once, wildly, then Ragan let him have it. His head bobbed back. He crumpled over on the seat.

A curious, indignant thought sliced through Ragan's brain as he turned back to the big gunman. "Where the hell was Lohrke?"

The big man fell forward as Ragan watched him. The gun slipped from his grasp and skidded clear across the sidewalk; Gladys Wentworth was crawling on her hands and knees for the shelter of the stationery shop's entrance. The big man pushed up, got his knees under him; then he went flat on his face, lifeless.

RAGAN took one step toward the girl, stopped short. The big man's gun had skidded close to Bardell's feet. The lawyer snatched it up; at the same time he jerked the girl to her feet. Ragan, his gun up and ready, faced a sight that sent an icy finger racing along his spine.

Bardell, holding the girl as a shield, had hunched his head below her shoulder. The muzzle of the big man's gun poked over that shoulder and leveled at Ragan.

Ragan aimed, knew he did not dare shoot. He jumped wildly to one side as Bardell's gun crashed. He lifted his own gun, hesitated, started to leap for the shelter of the doorway. Then Bardell's body jerked from behind the girl and another shot reverberated through the street.

Bardell staggered. Gladys Wentworth collapsed at his feet. Ragan turned. In the center of the pavement, now cleared of all traffic, Lohrke, spread-legged and rigid, was lowering a stiff, parallel arm that ended in his service revolver. Ragan looked back at Bardell just as the lawyer sprawled down on top of the girl.

The two gunmen were dead. Bardell, propped up against the side of the stationery store, was conscious. But he must have realized he was through. He was no longer antagonistic or defiant. Ragan and Lohrke kneeled beside him.

"You're lucky, Bardell," Lohrke said. "Lucky you won't live to stand trial. You ain't got but a few minutes. You'd better come clean."

"Sure." Bardell breathed with an effort. "Sure. Why not? Avellar had it coming anyway. He'd a' milked me of every dime I had. I called him to my office last night. I talked with him a while —till I knew the boys would be outside. Then I walked down the stairs with him. They let him have it. . . ."

The lawyer's words trailed off in a fit of coughing. It was some seconds before he continued. "The cops got here just as they loaded Avellar into the car. I was back in the doorway—they didn't see me. I knew the jig was up anyway, but I flashed the idea—the only idea I had left. Murder and suicide with a police gun. Because I recognized Carlton and McCaffery, knew they'd had trouble together.

"I came out behind Carlton, stuck him up. I told McCaffery I'd let Carlton have it if he argued. Then I just took Carlton's gun out and shoved it up to his head and—"

Ragan, his face dead white and rigid, began to curse. Bardell went on: "—and it was all over in a second. I had nothing to lose. I was hooked for the chair, anyway. That letter—that musta dropped out of Avellar's pocket when they bundled him into the car. If it wasn't for that I'd. . . ." The words trailed off.

Ragan stood up. His hands were shaking and his lip was wet with sweat. He rubbed his coat sleeve across his face. His arm was bleeding quite a lot.

A taxi load of reporters and photographers spilled out on the sidewalk and milled around him. When they exploded their questions, Ragan felt a tired grin pull at his mouth.

"Just say," he told them, "that Lieutenant Lohrke, together with Sam Ragan, the well-known private detective—Hell, Lohrke can give you the story."

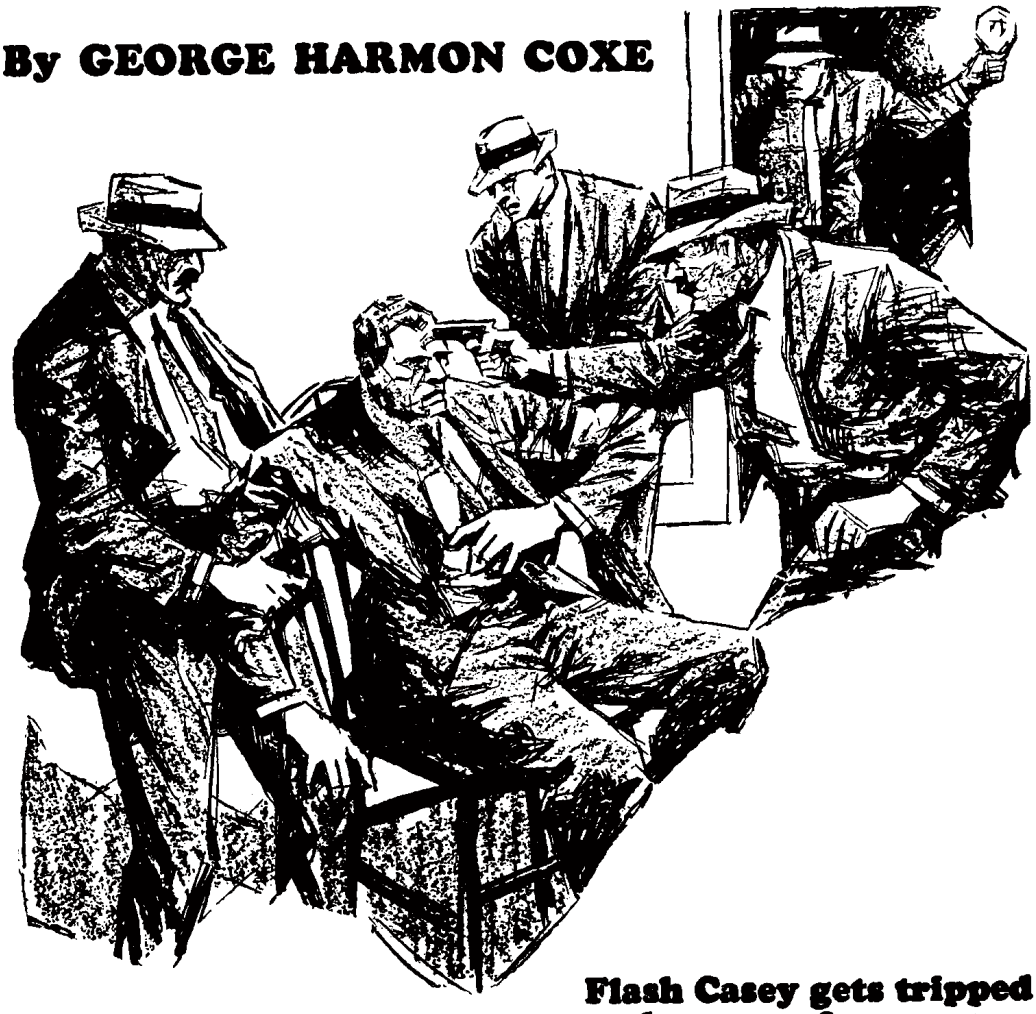
He stepped into the street and flagged a cab. Lohrke stepped close, brushed aside the reporters. "Where you going?" he demanded.

"I gotta get a bandage on this flipper," Ragan said. "An' I'm goin' to see Blanche Carlton. I had to break her the bad news last night. I'd like to tell her about this. It ain't good news—but it might help some."

He climbed into the cab. "Hell," he growled, "I ain't workin' for you—I'm workin' for my client. I've gotta earn that one-buck fee, ain't I?"

Pinch-Hitters

By GEORGE HARMON COXE



Flash Casey gets tripped by a nose for news

THE *Senett Hotel* boasts neither a marquee nor a doorman. Its squarish, seven-story stone façade is plain, weather beaten, definitely outmoded. Many of its guests—mostly male—occupy year-around suites, but it is in no sense a family hotel. Rather the clientele is the sort which likes good food, good liquor, and a management not too fussy about the True-name law.

Casey and Wade, arrayed in dinner jackets and gleaming white shirt fronts, and looking as unlike newspaper photographers as possible, turned their backs on the grill room at eight o'clock and trudged slowly up the steps to the separate street entrance.

Wade was still sucking his lips when they came out on the sidewalk, and the self-satisfied look on his round, blue-eyed face verged on a grin.

"How'd you know about that tenderloin special? It ain't on the menu."

Casey stopped beside the doorway, fished for a cigarette. "I know it. For old customers. It was good, wasn't it?"

"Hell, yes. I could cut the steak with my fork."

"That's your test, huh?" grunted Casey, amused. "How about the flavor?" He did not wait for an answer. "Blaine says we hadta put on monkey-suits. Okey, we start right."

He lit the cigarette, moved towards a taxi at the curb.

"This dressin' up business is the nuts," said Wade, tagging along. "Not more'n half of 'em dress at the *Club Regis*. And we can take just as good pictures in—"

"Decoys," muttered Casey. "The outfit is supposed to put us above suspicion. Tonight we're gentlemen, get it? We take the pictures on the side."

Casey opened the taxi door, pushed Wade in ahead of him, sat down beside him. He reached forward to close the door, said: *"Globe."* Then, before the driver could flip down the meter flag, he said: "Wait."

The man was passing the main entrance of the hotel when Casey saw him. The yellow glow which bathed the sidewalk threw into sharp relief a tall, stooped figure, a white pinched face; clothing that was a network of wrinkles. He moved forward into the shadows with a weaving, uncertain shuffle as Casey spoke; and Wade, looking up and following Casey's gaze, said:

"Boy, has he got a skinful!"

"Yeah," Casey said softly and opened the door. He crossed the sidewalk to intercept the man who was apparently headed for the alley at the corner of the building, called: "Jim."

The man lurched uncertainly, finally anchored himself with his back against the wall. "Don't bother me," he said, and his voice was thick, husky.

As he approached the man, a thin slab of light from a main floor window seemed to reflect from Casey's shirt-front and slide up to the rugged, somber face under the brim of the battered, incongruous felt. His voice was grimly amused.

"Hokey, my fran'."

"Oh." The man wheezed the word, hesitated. "Hyuh, Flashgun. Didn't know yuh; thought maybe you was a smarty."

Casey took the man by the arm, gently; and his voice was low, steady.

"Got a load, huh?"

"Yeah. And what a load!"

"I'll take you home, Jim. I gotta cab here and—"

"Just come from there."

"Arnold might tie the can to you if he sees—"

"He won't tie the can to Jim Degnan." The fellow attempted a laugh which ended in a cough. "With me testifyin' for him? He won't—"

"No," Casey said. "I guess he won't, at that."

"Who's this kid?" asked Degnan, and Casey saw that Wade, curious as usual, had moved alongside him. He told Degnan about Wade, asked:

"Where you goin'?"

"Gotta see Zella—Zella Elliott. Gotta job to do and—"

Degnan began to cough again and his heels slipped on the sidewalk. Casey held to the one arm, put his right hand on the man's coat, realizing as he helped Degnan steady himself, that the coat-front was moist as though from spilled drink.

Degnan pulled loose, staggered, said: "I gotta get goin', Flash. The back way, kid. Nobody'll see me. Obliged to you, though." He slid along the building, managed to navigate the corner and disappeared into the blackness of the alley.

WHEN the cab pulled out from the curb Wade said: "This Degnan, is he the guy that's testifyin' with Arnold on that snatch?"

"Yeah."

"Well, who is he, anyway?"

Casey looked out the cab window at the kaleidoscopic light and movement of Boylston Street; and the glare of a theater sign flashed through the cab windows, picking out the lines of his rugged

face, accentuating the tan of his skin. He spoke absently.

"Degnan used to be a cop. But he was only a kid, and bootleggin' made for easy money. There was a little trouble, and they chucked him off the force; he got a job as house dick at the *Eastland*. He was hitting the booze pretty heavy, got running with Joe Steiger and—"

"The guy that tried to put the snatch on Arnold?" exploded Wade.

"Yeah. And he got mixed up in some shakedown racket. The *Eastland* threw him out, and I guess Steiger let him lay. Anyway, Arnold picked him out of the gutter about six months ago—don't ask me why."

Casey fell silent a moment as he thought about Sam Arnold. The City's number one gambler. A lone wolf. Hard, shrewd, willing to bet anything on anything. Reputedly a good friend, a tough enemy. He had been in court but once. That time for nearly beating to death a man who welched and double-crossed him.

Joe Steiger was an alley rat who had suffered from growing pains. He was something of a gambler himself, a promoter—of anything that promised monetary rewards. His court record was long, but convictions were few, because he did not travel with a mob; when he needed a job done, he hired outside thugs.

A month previous an attempt had been made to snatch Arnold. But somehow, Degnan had got wind of the plan and tipped off the gambler. The two outsiders who had engineered the attempt were now on trial. Wiseacres about town thought perhaps Steiger was behind the plan.

The shrill of a traffic cop's whistle and Wade's voice jarred Casey back to the moment.

"It was a dumb stunt, trying to snatch a guy like Arnold."

"You think so, huh?" Casey's voice got sardonic. "Well, guess again. Not one snatch in ten ever gets aired. The best meat of all is guys like Arnold who make their living outside the law. That kind of a snatch never gets to the police. The guy pays up and shuts up, because he knows where a squawk'll put him. Arnold was okey—only Degnan tipped somebody's mitt."

Wade seemed to think over this bit of information for a moment while the cab turned down Savery Street towards the *Globe* entrance. Finally he said:

"Degnan was going to see Zella Elliott, eh? The dame that sings on the radio?"

"Yeah," muttered Casey, sitting up on the seat.

"What for, I wonder. He was pretty crocked to—"

"Forget it, will yuh?" growled Casey. "You're wearin' me down. Degnan works for Arnold—night watchman or guard or something. Arnold owns the *Senett*. Zella has a suite on the same floor with Arnold. I understand it's complimentary. Hell, you know the facts of life, don't you?"

"Aw, nerts. I was just—"

"Then," said Casey, throwing up a hand in a gesture of amused exasperation, "forget Degnan and start thinkin' about the candid camera shots you and I got all dressed up to take."

II

BLAINE, City Editor of the *Globe*, was working overtime. He was still on duty when Casey and Wade came into the city room, and he looked up as they approached, pushed back his chair.

"I've been waiting for you," he said crisply. "You're late."

"All right," said Casey, "we're late."

Blaine's lip curled. He was a thin man, prematurely gray, with a hatchet face and predatory gray eyes. Immaculately dressed, stiff collar and all, he was a politely sardonic driver and the best desk man in the city. Casey admitted this,

even though Blaine's methods often enraged him.

"You don't look as much like waiters as I thought." Blaine smiled thinly, surveyed Casey and Wade with a cold, searching glance. He grunted, said:

"Now get this. We want these *Club Regis* shots for a Sunday feature. Each of you take one of those little candid cameras. Get separate tables, one on each side of the floor. Get all the shots you can of the dancers, the chorus—and the less clothes they have on when you get them, the better I'll like it."

"Me, too." Casey began to grin.

"And get 'em here by midnight," said Blaine, ignoring the interruption. His eyebrows lifted. "You better not get crocked either, or—"

"You want pictures, don't you?" clipped Casey, his grin fading.

"That's why I'm sending the two of you."

"Then quit beefin'." Casey muttered an oath. "You'll get 'em. But how I get 'em or how many drinks I have is my business."

"If you get one good one between you I'll be lucky," sniffed Blaine. Then his eyes narrowed, his jaw dropped and he swallowed before he spoke. "How'd you cut your hand?"

"Cut whose hand?" Casey looked surprised.

Blaine's voice was sarcastic. "What color's blood?"

Casey lifted his right hand, turned it over. The inside of his fingers were red-stained. He spread the fingers stiffly, flexed them, turned the hand over. Then his eyes widened slowly as he saw there was no cut or abrasion; and he remembered the moist front of Degnan's coat and said, "Jeeze!" softly.

"Well?" Blaine drawled.

"His coat was wet when I propped him up," Casey said. "I thought it was liquor."

"Degnan?" gasped Wade hollowly.

Blaine leaned forward in his chair. "Don't go dumb on me, you big ox. What—"

Casey told him then, told the incident in short, clipped sentences. "And he was going to see Zella Elliott," he finished.

"Said he had a job to do," Wade added.

Blaine glanced quickly about the city room, his sharp, gray eyes touching briefly the slot, the assortment of heads, bent forward at their typewriters or slouched indolently behind desks.

"With that kidnap trial on the fire," he said eagerly, "even Degnan's worth a column. With Elliott mixed up in it—" He broke off as his eyes fastened on a big man at the far side of the room. *"Mallon!"*

"Mallon?" grunted Casey. "Why not Potter or—"

"I don't give out assignments on your recommendation," bristled Blaine.

"I've heard that before," snorted Casey, "only—"

"You don't like Mallon, huh?"

Casey scowled and said nothing. Blaine's lifted brows gave a touch of a sardonic smile to his thin face. He was a reporter at heart, Blaine. A newsman. To him, pictures, photographers, were a necessary evil; it was the story that counted. That his sympathy and primary interest went to the reporter, was natural. This fact was evident in his speech.

"You don't like him because he's a bigger prima donna than you are. Well, get this: Mallon's got a nose for news; he knows story values. You stumbled on to something that looks hot. Mallon'll cover. All you got to do is take pictures and do what he tells you."

"How about me?" broke in Wade eagerly.

"You?" Blaine's tone was impatient. "Down to the *Regis* for you. You're late as it is. And you better bring back a couple shots I can use."

Mallon's voice boomed, "Hi, Flash," and he drew to a stop beside the photographer as Wade turned and shuffled away, a crestfallen and dejected figure.

Casey did not answer; he watched

Blaine with sultry eyes as the city editor told Mallon the story.

They were about the same height, Mallon and Casey; about the same weight. Yet, as they stood there in front of the desk, it was readily apparent that they had but little in common.

Casey, for all his bulging shirt front, thick hands, and lumpy shoulder muscles that threatened to burst the seams of his coat, had about him a definite leanness to his face, to his stomach. Mallon's bulk was sleek, accentuated by his double-breasted gray suit; his face was pink and smooth; his panama was newly cleaned. Even his hair was neatly trimmed, contrasting sharply with Casey's shaggy nape.

Blaine hurried on with his story, and Casey grumbled inwardly. Mallon was good, all right. He could write. But he talked too much, and too loud. A comparatively new man to the *Globe*—from St. Louis—a personality lad. A nose for news, maybe; but a *poseur,* a blusterer. Still, what difference did it make? On a job like this all he, Casey, had to do was take pictures.

"And you, Flash," Blaine was saying, "you stick with Mallon. He'll tell you—"

"Sure," boomed Mallon with a careless wave of a fat hand, "I'll handle it. Get the box, and let's go, Flash."

THE lobby of the *Senett* was quiet and gloomy. The lights were subdued, the furniture was old and heavy. There were a lot of pillars, a half dozen potted palms—and two plain-clothesmen idling about as Casey and Mallon came up the main staircase and turned towards the elevators.

Mallon asked the elevator boy where Zella Elliott's apartment was and they got off on the fifth floor. There was a reporter from the *News* in the hall; a uniformed policeman in front of a door, near the rear of the corridor, and Mallon turned to Casey.

"It broke. Guess we just about got here in time."

The fellow from the *News* called a greeting, and when Casey and Mallon continued on past him he added: "Don't get all lathered up—you can't get in."

"That's what you think," said Mallon and there was no question about his swagger.

The cop stopped them. Casey did not know the fellow and he asked what had happened. The cop shook his head, said: "All I know is no reporters or button pushers go in."

"Who's in there?" asked Casey.

"Lieutenant Stevens—Lieutenant Logan."

Casey smiled in satisfaction and Mallon said: "Tell 'em that Mallon's out here. Mallon of the *Globe*. Tell 'em I've got some dope on Degnan that they oughtta have."

Casey looked at Mallon and scowled at the use of the personal pronoun. The cop hesitated, but Mallon had his personality primed and hitting on all eight. His manner apparently shook the policeman's resolve because he finally said: "Wait," and stepped into the room.

When the door opened again, Lieutenant Logan stood framed in the opening. He was a good friend of Casey's. A tall, smooth-shaven man, well set-up, handsome. His hair and eyes were black. He had an excellent record, the reputation of a square shooter, and there was a quiet hardness about him, sufficiently accepted so that he could wear spats and a derby when he wanted to—and get away with them.

"What about Degnan, Flash?" he said quietly, ignoring Mallon.

Casey started to speak, but Mallon beat him to it. "Show him your hand," he snapped, and reached down and grabbed Casey's wrist.

He held up the fingers. They were still red-stained and as Logan's eyes narrowed, Mallon said: "That blood is Degnan's."

"You wouldn't kid me, would you?"

"We don't have to," said Mallon.

Logan's brows drew together. He looked at Casey, who nodded slightly

without speaking. The lieutenant stood back from the door, said: "I guess you'd better come in."

Casey saw Degnan first. He lay in the center of the room, partly on his back, partly on his side; and there was something horribly unfamiliar about the unnatural sprawl of the thin figure, the reddish stain on the vest and coat of the wrinkled blue suit—the blood-clotted hole in front of one ear.

There was nothing new in death—to Casey. He had seen it, photographed it, enough times to get used to it. But this was different. Because he knew now that Degnan was dying when he talked with him a half hour previous. And he had joked about it, and Degnan had played his hand and never let on that the load he carried was lead, not liquor.

The sharp suck of Mallon's breath, jerked up Casey's eyes. They flicked past Lieutenant Stevens and another plain-clothesman, fastened on the other figure at one side of the room. This time the picture of death registered its image on his brain with a distinct shock that stiffened him and stopped his breathing.

Zella Elliott lay on her stomach. One arm was doubled under her; the other outflung. A foot from this outstretched hand was a heavy automatic.

Her artificially blond head was cocked at a peculiar angle, and Casey saw that the plump, rouged face was twisted with anger and something else—fear—hate—even in death. A semi-circle of blood on the rug peered from beneath her flame-colored evening dress.

III

LIEUTENANT STEVENS, a bronzed, lean-faced fellow with gray-white hair and green-gray eyes, scowled at the intrusion and shot a question at Logan. When he got the answer he turned to Casey.

"Let's see the hand."

Casey held it up.

"Where'd you get it?"

Mallon chimed in before Casey could answer: "We'll tell you for a couple pictures and the story."

"You'll tell me anyway," clipped Stevens, who made no attempt to disguise his irritation and dislike of Mallon's cocky attitude.

"Sure," said Mallon easily. "But we don't have to tell you now, and you know it." He turned to Casey. "Come on, Flash. Do something. Get out the box."

Casey did not even look annoyed this time, because he was thinking about Zella Elliott. She was not beautiful, never had been. But she was a regular, had that reputation. An old-times blues singer of the Sophie Tucker school. She had the manner, the voice, something of the build, although she was not quite so heavy.

Casey opened his plate-case and took out his tripod, pulled out the legs and set it up. But it was another moment before he got his mind on his work. Zella's death did not fit the picture; did not make sense. She was a square-shooter, loyal. She probably had as wide an acquaintance among the underworld as the police. Yet her personal affairs had always been on the level. She would not welch, squeal, betray a confidence—then why was she killed?

"Come on, Flash," rapped Mallon irritably.

Casey's face flushed and his fists knotted instinctively. A nose for news, huh? A sliver of grim humor streaked through his brain and his fists relaxed. He took out a flashbulb as Mallon said:

"All we want is a couple shots, Stevens, and—"

"Take 'em," barked the lieutenant, "and quit givin' me the run-around. When we got a look at the set-up, we thought Arnold might've knocked off the two of 'em. We can't find him. He's a hot-headed, jealous egg. If he found them here together and—" He broke

off as Casey's flashbulb went off, cursed once, added: "Speak your piece, Mallon. Because *Globe* or no *Globe* I'm gonna beat it out of you if you don't."

He started for Mallon and for the first time the reporter's bored nonchalance deserted him. He took a step backward, said:

"Degnan was shot before he came up here."

That stopped Stevens, and Mallon went on with his story. Casey was putting away his tripod when the reporter finished.

Stevens said: "Arnold mightta got wise to something, put the slug on Degnan in his room, left him for dead, and then come here to get Zella."

"Degnan," grunted Casey, "didn't have that head wound when I saw him downstairs."

"He didn't have—" Stevens went slack-jawed and his mouth stayed open as realization struck home. There followed a long moment of hushed silence. Then Logan's dark brows knotted and he whistled softly. Stevens' jaws clicked shut and his voice got harsh, angry.

"Why the hell didn't you say so?"

"I wasn't tellin' my story," Casey said wearily. "Mallon was."

"He might've come here to rub out Zella," Mallon said quickly. "You said he had to see her, had a job to do. Maybe he came up here and shot her and—"

"There's only one gun in the place," Logan said flatly. "It's been fired twice." He jingled two empty shells in his hand. "And I think"—he hesitated and one eyebrow cocked—"I think they were both killed with the same gun."

"Joe Steiger wanted Degnan out," Stevens said thoughtfully. "With Arnold and Degnan testifying, those two would-be snatchers would get about ninety-nine years. If they do, they'll probably squawk. Then if Steiger *was* behind it—" He stopped and pulled thoughtfully on his lower lip.

"That might be the angle on Degnan—but Zella—" He growled impatiently. "It don't make sense."

Logan moved towards Casey. He was still jingling the shells in his hand and an enigmatic smile bared his white, even teeth.

"You generally have a piece to speak, Flash," he said easily. "No ideas this time?"

"Me?" Casey's brows lifted in mock surprise. He sniffed, gave Logan a wry glance, then looked at Mallon and his brows drew down. "Hell, no. Mallon's got the ideas. I just take pictures."

Stevens spoke to Logan as Mallon and Casey moved towards the door. "Stick around, Logan. Arnold might come back. I'll get the word out to pick him up—and Steiger, too. He'll probably have an alibi if he's in on it. But I'd like to hear it."

MALLON stopped at the desk in the lobby and Casey went on out to the sidewalk and piled his plate-case and camera in a taxi. While he waited he lit a cigarette and his smoldering thoughts grappled with the double murder. He was still fighting the problem and wondering, with a half guilty sense of neglect, what might have happened if he had insisted on going upstairs with Degnan, when Mallon came out.

Casey said: *"Globe."*

Mallon stopped with his foot on the running-board, stuck his head in the driver's compartment. "No. 736 Walton Street."

"Why?" Casey's voice was annoyed.

"That's where Degnan lived," said Mallon, dropping down on the seat. "I found out at the desk."

"What about it?"

"He mightta been shot there. I wantta look over his place."

"How about these pictures I just got?"

"They'll keep. We got plenty of time, ain't we?"

"And we got the story," grunted Casey. "We got a couple exclusive shots. What's the idea of—"

"Don't be dumb." Mallon snorted the words and tapped a cigarette on a

gleaming thumbnail. "We give the room the once over before the cops tear it to pieces. We might run on to something that—"

"I never saw a reporter yet that didn't think he could outsmart the whole damn' detective bureau."

"It wouldn't be so hard," said Mallon.

"Boy!" Casey blew out a cloud of smoke that bounced back off the glass partition of the front seat, and shook his head sadly. "What a job!"

"You don't like it, huh?"

"I'm sick of the whole damn' business."

"You can go back," Mallon said curtly. "Only Blaine said—"

"I know—I know. And you'd probably tell him all about it."

The taxi pulled up to the curb, a scant three blocks away from the *Senett,* and Casey finished his thought as he got out. "Some day, I think you might lose some skin on that nose for news."

SEVEN THIRTY-SIX was a remodeled brownstone front. There were six worn stone steps, steep ones; a vestibule dimly lighted by yellow rays that filtered through a frosted glass panel from the inner hall; six mail boxes. Under the nearest one, 3-B, was the name Degnan.

The carpeted stairs mounting from the inner hall were wide, the banister smooth and worn. Opposite doors gave on the third floor landing and one of these was ajar. Mallon peered at the gilt painted number on the dark panel and pushed on into the room.

It was a plainly and inexpensively furnished living-room, quite in order except for an upset chair, and a parchment shaded lamp which had been tipped over on the oblong center table. An inner hall led from the left wall of the room and Casey moved towards it, peered into its darkness. He slipped his plate-case from his shoulder, leaned indolently back against the wall. He tried to brush the cigarette ashes from his shirt front, but the effort was clumsy and he left the gleaming whiteness with a one-inch gray smudge.

Mallon looked back and forth across the room, his brown eyes flashing their eager interest. Casey grunted, said:

"Well, do your stuff, Sherlock, and let's get out of here."

Mallon inspected the room carefully, finally went down the hall. Casey picked up the plate-case and followed him through the two bedrooms, the bath, to the kitchen. After five minutes or so, Mallon turned out the kitchen light and started back down the hall. When he reached the threshold of the living-room, he stopped short, stiffened there.

Casey heard the sound a moment later. Footsteps on the landing; men's voices in low tones.

Mallon spun about and pushed Casey ahead of him down the blackness of the inner hall. Casey felt the linoleum covering of the kitchen floor beneath his feet when he heard the living-room door open. He dodged around Mallon, moved quickly back to the kitchen doorway, his eyes fastening on the lighted rectangle at the end of the hall.

Four men moved slowly into his range of vision. Two of them were strangers; one, a thick-set bruiser, the other, tall, thin, swarthy.

The other two men he recognized at once. Sam Arnold was in the center of the group. The plump, dark man with the mustache who stood behind Arnold and held a gun in his back was Joe Steiger. And that meant to Casey just one thing; Steiger must have gunned out Degnan and probably Zella as well.

Casey blew out his pent-up breath in a slow, silent blast. For the first time that evening he felt the blood whip through his veins, the definite tingle to his nerve ends. Nose for news—or luck? It didn't matter. Here was something tangible, something to get excited about. He forgot all about Mallon until he heard the whispered words in his ear:

"Let's get the hell out of here!"

"What for?" breathed Casey. "It's what we wanted, ain't it? Stick around and we might get a story that is a story." He grunted softly. "I might even get another picture."

"You're nuts," said Mallon excitedly. "Suppose the heat goes on?"

"If we lay low we'll be okey."

"I know enough about it now. Who's in there anyway? Hoods, ain't they? I saw Arnold and that somebody had a gun on him. I wantta flash the office—we oughtta get the cops."

"The hell with the office," Casey whispered. "But the cops—yeah. Only if we skip now maybe it'll be all over before we get back. One of us oughtta stay. Maybe—" He broke off, knelt in the darkness beside his plate-case. Opening it, he felt around until he found a flashbulb. He put it in his pocket, fastened the case.

"Listen. If you wantta get the cops, okey. Unlock the back door—go out that way. But take my plate-case with you."

"But what're you—"

"Me? I'm not gonna run out on a thing like this. I can keep out of the way—and anything's liable to happen. But be damn' sure you take that plate-case with you. If I have to run I want a head start. And I don't want anything tangling up my legs."

Voices drifted down the hall now, and Casey moved along the wall towards the door of the back bedroom.

IV

THAT back bedroom wasn't good enough. Casey could catch a word now and then, but the conversation was low, and he was unable to get the gist of it. So he held his breath, sidled down the hall, past the bathroom to the front bedroom and backed through the open door.

This was more like it. The darkness concealed him, yet the talking was audible; and by keeping close to the door, he could get an occasional glimpse of the occupants of the living-room.

Steiger was speaking.

"I warned you a long time ago, Arnold, so there's no use going into that. If the snatch had worked you'd be better off."

Casey stuck his head into the hall. From this position he had a good view of Arnold. The man stood spread-legged, his hands in his trousers pockets. He appeared to be about forty-five, quietly dressed, with grayish hair under the lightweight felt and a clean, hard line to his smooth-shaven jaw. If he felt fear—any emotion—his mask-like face did not betray him.

"Degnan, the ——" Steiger went on. "I don't know how the hell he found out about that snatch, but he mustta thought a lot of you, Arnold, to cross me up.

"Klem and Niska came here tonight. They tried to get Degnan to call you on the phone and get you over here. We might've framed some sort of murder and suicide. Anyway, they could've put you out nice and neat and I'd have my alibi.

"But Degnan wouldn't play. He got tough, made a break for his gun. Niska let him have it. Only you didn't do a very good job, did you, Niska?"

A thin, sharp voice said: "What the hell! He had two in the vest. He didn't move. He looked dead. Who'd think he'd walk three blocks, carryin' that lead."

"But he did," rapped Steiger. "Probably called you at the *Senett* to warn you, Arnold, only you weren't there. So he went to see Zella so he could tell her. He knew you'd see her some time tonight."

Steiger laughed shortly. "We had the same idea. Klem and Niska went to Zella's place to wait for you. Then Degnan busts in and starts to blast."

"When I dropped him," the thin,

sharp voice went on, "what does the fluzie do but grab for his gun and open up on us. She damn' near got me, the tramp. The first slug nicked my coat. I had to let her have it."

"I get it." Arnold turned slowly. Casey could see his face clearly and the only clue to his feelings was the voice.

"Zella thought enough of me, enough of Degnan to play out the string. And you murdered her." Arnold's voice rose, and his movement was lightning fast.

Both hands whipped from his pockets. They were empty, but they were fists when they struck. Casey heard them click against bone, heard a grunt. Then Steiger sagged to the floor in Casey's range of vision and the thick-set bruiser stepped forward and brought his gun down on Arnold's head.

The gambler's hat fell off and he crumpled and pitched forward. The thick-set man and the thin fellow picked up Steiger. They shook him, slapped his face. After a few seconds he came around and staggered to his feet. Klem, the thick-set man, growled:

"Let's cut out the horse play. If we're gonna knock him off what're we waitin' for—the cops?"

Steiger, now standing in full view of Casey, rubbed his jaw, glared down at Arnold, said: "Degnan and the dame both got it from the same heater. Got it, Niska?"

The thin man held out a revolver and Steiger took it. "This'll do it," he said. "Get a chair, prop him up at the table. We'll put a slug through the temple, contact wound. It might kid the cops into thinking he killed the other two and took the suicide. It won't do no harm, anyway."

Casey felt the sweat break out on his forehead. He had the story; he knew Steiger meant what he said, and he knew there was but little time left.

Where the hell was Mallon? How long had he been gone? Not more than a minute or two, probably. It just seemed long. But if he ran the three blocks to the *Senett* and tipped off Logan— Someone dragged a chair across the room. Niska and Steiger were helping the half-conscious Arnold to his feet.

Sweat, cold sweat, was running down into Casey's eyebrows now. His own safety was assured; he knew that. All he had to do was to stay right where he was—and see murder done.

He thought of Degnan, of Zella Elliott. He'd known Degnan pretty well at one time, and he could not forget the way the fellow had made his sacrifice. He was no friend of Zella's, but he knew her; knew her for the square shooter that she was. And what she had tried to do tonight put an uneasy hollowness in his stomach. Snatching up Degnan's gun—trying to shoot it out with two professionals.

Arnold. A gambler, but at least a straight one. And Steiger—crooked, tricky, merciless. A killer. Casey thought of all this. Perhaps it was some such idea that spurred him to action; probably it was for another reason entirely.

If he saw Arnold murdered, he'd have to tell his story. And when Steiger went on trial, he'd have to testify. He knew that; knew that he would stick to his story. But he also knew what would probably happen to him if he did. He'd photographed witnesses before. Dead ones. So what difference did it make when he took his chance?

A photograph was something that needed no further testimony. Juries liked pictures—*and it might save Arnold's life.* What the hell. He knew the way to the back door, knew it was unlocked.

He screwed the flashbulb into the synchronized flashgun and slid softly into the hall. Arnold was conscious now. Steiger was telling what would happen to him, working himself up.

"I'm in this far enough now," Steiger finished, "so that any chance is worth a whirl. You go out with the same gun that caught Degnan and Zella. I've got

an alibi for that job. Klem and Niska are hot, but they'll be on their way because the cops won't know who to look for. I don't think they can pin it on me."

Casey was three feet from the threshold as Steiger finished. He had the camera open, the shutter adjusted. He could not see any of the men at the moment—the table was to the left—and he was glad of this, because he knew he could not be seen. He moved forward to the edge of the doorway.

He hesitated there a moment until Steiger said: "Hold him, you guys!" Then Casey stepped forward, brought the camera to his shoulder.

The strange tableau imprinted itself on his brain. Arnold held tight in the chair by Klem and Niska. Steiger slightly behind, the blue revolver scarcely an inch from Arnold's gray temple. Then the flashbulb went off, its instantaneous brilliance blanketing the room.

Casey spun back into the hall before anyone else stirred. He had covered half the distance to the kitchen before he heard Steiger shout a curse and an order.

"Get him! Get him, you ———!"

Casey's left foot slapped down on the linoleum of the kitchen. It was a cinch. Caught 'em flat-footed. He chuckled hoarsely, took two long strides; then his toe caught some hard, bulky object.

There was no chance to recover his balance. So great was his speed that he could not even break his fall. It was as though his knees had been cut from under him, and he had just time for one bitter thought: Mallon had left the plate-case behind. Then the floor came up and smacked him.

His face hit first; nose, then forehead. He must have lost consciousness for a moment because when he tried to get up he saw that the lights were on. He turned then, turned and looked up at the snouty muzzle of an automatic which angled down at him two feet from his head.

He sat up, lifted his eyes to the thin, swart, mustached face of Niska, and he saw the lips curl into a leering smile. Not until then did he realize that his nose was bleeding, that large red drops were spreading a weird pattern over his white shirt front.

IT was a long time before Casey felt any fear. And that was because his brain festered with his anger at Mallon. He couldn't think of anything else until Niska said: "Get up, punk!"

Casey said: "Okey, mugg. No argument," and got unsteadily to his feet. He saw Klem, his low forehead crossed in an apparently uncomprehending scowl, come into the kitchen followed by Arnold and Steiger.

Blood still dripped from Casey's nose, and he took out a handkerchief and tried to staunch the crimson flow. There was a dull ache in his head, and exploring fingers found the swelling lump at one side of his forehead. Steiger swore just once, said: "Hello, Flash. This time you really stubbed your toe, huh?"

Casey looked down at the camera. He might as well have thrown it at the floor. It was a mess. His gaze caught the plate-case and he began to curse in a low, bitter monotone. Mallon, and his nose for news. Hot, cancerous anger crowded everything else from his brain until he heard Steiger say:

"Bring the camera, that case, and come on. I guess we'll have to change our plans."

Casey, still holding the handkerchief to his nose, picked up the camera, shouldered the strap of the plate-case. As he turned towards the hall doorway he saw that Arnold had his hands back in his pockets and was watching him with steady gray eyes. There was a thin trickle of blood at the gambler's temple, but his face was a mask.

"I don't know all the answers, but it was a nice idea, Flash. I appreciate it."

"Come on," rapped Steiger. He

jerked Arnold around, but the gambler said: "Seems like a lot of people are tryin' to do me a good turn tonight," as he was pulled into the hall.

V

HEY went down the front stairs in single file. Niska, Casey, with Klem's gun in his back; Arnold, then Steiger. There was a sedan at the curb, a big, heavy-looking job. Niska got in behind the wheel; the rest crowded into the tonneau. Casey and Arnold sat on the back seat; Steiger and Klem sat facing them on the holding seats.

Niska asked for directions, and Steiger gave him an address on Warren Avenue. Casey's nose had stopped bleeding and he tried to put Mallon out of his mind and think about his predicament.

Arnold said: "How'd you get wise to this, Flash?"

Casey told him how he and Mallon decided to look over the rooms.

"Then," pressed Arnold, "how come you muffed it? You had a good start down the hall. What the hell made you fall over that—"

"A nose for news," said Casey.

Arnold said: "What?"

Casey did not answer. Instead he glanced out of the rear windows. What the hell was keeping Mallon? If the police came now, it might be time enough. He twisted his neck to get a better view. Then he saw Wade.

At first Casey couldn't believe it. Wade was at the *Club Regis*. The sedan pulled out from the curb. But it was Wade. He was hanging out of the taxi window. Casey remembered now. That checkered cab had rolled slowly from the other direction as they came down the steps, and for a moment he thought it was going to stop. It had stopped now, but at the opposite curb, about fifty feet away. Casey breathed an oath and pressed his face against the glass.

"Sit up, mugg," Klem said. Casey straightened on the seat. "And stay away from that window," added Steiger.

Casey looked out through the windshield and watched Niska turn right into Columbus Avenue. The sedan picked up speed and moved at an even pace through the negro district and its rows of sordid frame and brick buildings.

Casey did not look around again. There was no need for it. Either Wade had seen him, or he hadn't. And if he had, he'd either play it cagey, perhaps pick up a cop or something, or he'd try some crazy stunt that would probably backfire and get his own neck in a jam. In any case, there was nothing Casey could do about it.

The sedan rolled to a stop four or five minutes later. On the sidewalk, with Klem's gun in his back, Casey inspected the house in front of him. It was one of a row, cheap frame tenements. The only light came from the ground floor, and through curtainless windows a bald-headed man in his undershirt was reading a paper, his stockinged feet cocked on a table.

Casey glanced up and down the darkened, deserted street. At the next corner, light from a small drug-store flooded the sidewalk, picked out the checkered body of a taxicab. How long it had been there he did not know. He could not see Wade.

Klem cursed him, and jabbed the gun hard against his spine. "Come on, smarty. On your way."

Casey followed Arnold up the rickety steps, across the wooden porch and into the semi-darkness of a narrow hall that was hot and stuffy, that smelled of dirt and fried food and garbage.

THE tenement Steiger led them to was on the third floor. After he had turned on the lights and shut and locked the door, he dropped into a moldy-looking over-stuffed chair and began to smile.

For the first time, Casey studied the man. Not much over thirty, he thought. Sleek, well-fed—like Mallon; but the stamp of the gutter was still on his face. A waxed mustache; dark eyes that were shining and pitiless now. The mirthless smile, the nonchalant attitude gave the impression that he was no longer in a hurry; and Casey was glad of that, because if Wade had seen him, had followed—

"You two guys"—Steiger nodded at Casey and Arnold—"sit down on that davenport."

Casey looked at Arnold, who shrugged and moved to the threadbare piece near the door.

"And you, Niska, you keep that rod on 'em." He glanced at Klem. "Bring me that camera and case."

Steiger fumbled with the camera for a few seconds before he could get the plateholder from the back. When he finally managed the operation, he tossed the camera on the floor, pulled out the two plates; and, as though that were not enough, placed them on the floor and ground them to minute pieces under his heel.

"To make sure," he said, opening the plate-case, "we'll take care of the rest of 'em."

Which he did, slowly, deliberately. Casey counted the unexposed plates. Fourteen of them. Steiger's contemptuous attitude fanned his smoldering anger, and brought a flush to his face. To hide this, he looked away, noticed the inner hall, wondered if the layout here was like Degnan's place.

"I think maybe this is a better idea after all," Steiger said, glancing at Niska. "If I pay you two guys off tonight, you can lam out of here. You took this dump for a month, didn't you?"

"Yeah," said Niska.

"And the time ain't up for a couple weeks." Steiger went on: "And I guess you don't need to worry about maid service or anybody botherin' you till that month's up. If you put a towel over the muzzle of your gun, you can rub 'em out nice and quiet and—"

"I don't like it," Niska said, his thin, swart face twisting in a frown. "Knockin' off newspaper guys is tough business. It makes a stink."

"Yeah," chimed in Klem. He picked at a cauliflower ear and his low forehead was corrugated with thought.

"Maybe we oughtta let 'em go," sneered Steiger.

There seemed to be no answer to this. Niska glanced at Klem, back at Steiger. After a moment he shrugged and rubbed the barrel of his automatic against the palm of his left hand. "Okey," he said. "Spill it."

Steiger's eyes gleamed their satisfaction and he stroked his mustache with the thumbnail of his right hand.

"That's more like it. You two were lucky tonight. You picked up Arnold before he got back to the *Senett*. Nobody in town's got a line on you."

Steiger stood up, took a thick fold of bills from his trousers pocket. Casey saw a $500 note on top. Steiger counted off $3,000, passed it to Niska, gave a like sum to Klem.

"Now you're set. Put these muggs out—and beat it. The cops're looking for me. I'm goin' down and give myself up—get this questionin' over. It might be two weeks before they find the bodies, and I don't think they can hang the kill on me. Anyway, it's a chance I gotta take."

Steiger started down the inner hall as he finished. Casey saw a light go on, and a half minute later Steiger came back with a thick towel which he tossed to Niska.

"Take 'em one at a time." He glanced at Casey and Arnold. "Stand up."

Casey got to his feet. Gone was his brief reign of sartorial splendor. His hat was crammed down on hair that was sodden and tousled. The tuxedo was red-spotted, the shirt front a bulging, crumpled mess of crimson and white.

His nose was swollen, red-flecked at the nostrils and the lump on his forehead was blue—and sweaty.

He realized that his knees were weak. They weren't shaking but there was no stiffness to them. The palms of his hands were damp; his throat was dry.

Steiger said: "I hate to do it, Flash, but it's the business. It's no fun for me, but you stuck your nose in—and you've been around enough to know how things are."

"Suppose," Casey said thickly, "suppose I promised not to squawk."

"Nope," grunted Steiger. "You're not that kind of a guy. If you was a rat I might take a chance that you'd be afraid to talk. But you ain't. When you had time to think it over, you'd be just crazy enough to tell what you knew, and then I'd have to go through with it anyway."

Casey felt the sweat on his upper lip now. He knew Steiger was not bluffing. There was nothing to bluff about. He knew fear now. He was not panicky. He thought he could make himself stand up and take it, and not grovel at Steiger's feet. But he was afraid, because he did not want to die like a spy against a brick wall, without a chance, without a struggle.

Steiger said something that Casey did not catch. Niska had backed away about three feet and was wrapping the towel over the end of the automatic.

Casey glanced at the door at his right. He had seen Steiger lock it; it would take four long steps to gain the darkness of the inner hall across the room. He'd never make it. Then, as he realized the hopelessness of the predicament, his mind slid back to Mallon, and the plate-case which had caused all the trouble. His hand moved up to the lump on his forehead. If only Mallon had to stand here beside him and take it, it wouldn't be so bad—

Steiger had moved over in front of Arnold and now he spoke. "Anything you want to say?"

Arnold's lips pulled back against his teeth. "Not to you, you ————!"

"Okey." Steiger flushed and turned to Casey. "You got your choice, Flash. You want it first—or last?"

Casey stiffened his legs. He wet his lips and forced them into a grin. He opened his mouth. Then three sharp knocks fell upon the door.

Casey's mouth stayed open as his head jerked around. Steiger breathed a curse. His eyes widened, swiveled back and forth across the room. He took out his automatic, stepped to the door, stopped with his hand on the knob.

"Maybe it's the pay-off," he whispered hoarsely. "You, Niska, Klem—watch 'em!"

The key scratched in the lock. Steiger turned the knob slowly, and Casey watched the door inch open. He tore his gaze back to Niska. The fellow's swart face had paled, but he was watching him like a hawk, and Casey's eyes slid back to the door. It was open two inches now and Steiger's gun was in the opening.

A soft curse slid from someone's lips. Then Steiger opened the door and stepped back.

Wade stood there with his hands on his hips. He was bareheaded, his face as white as his stiff shirt front.

Steiger, his gun level, backed away from the door, said: "Come on in, punk!"

VI

WADE did not hesitate long. He looked at the gun in Steiger's hand for an instant, then glanced up at Casey. He grinned, then, and stepped across the threshold.

"Oh." Casey found his voice, choked on the first word. "Oh, you cluck. You dumb—"

"How'd you get here?" rapped Stei-

ger, his voice cracking. "How'd you know we—"

"It's a plant," Klem barked, and thrust his bullet head forward from hunched shoulders.

"I saw you come out of Degnan's place," Wade said hurriedly, and started to close the door with a slow, deliberate movement. "I was in a taxi, followed you here. I saw Flash, didn't know just what—"

"You crazy fool," ground out Casey. "Why didn't you—"

"It's a plant!" croaked Klem again.

"Did you tip off the cops?" clipped Steiger. "Because if you did, I'll put you away first if it's the last thing I do."

"The cops?" Wade's eyes widened. His guileless, youthful face looked surprised.

Steiger stepped forward to lock the door. Then it happened.

Casey was not sure of the exact sequence. He did not know whether Wade started it, or whether it was Arnold. He saw the young photographer stiffen, saw his eyes shoot over Steiger's shoulder to the other side of the room. He thought he heard Arnold move beside him. Then Wade yelled: "Drop!"

Casey did not know the significance of the command, but he saw Wade throw himself at Steiger's knees. As Casey spun on Niska, Arnold flashed by him. Someone said: "Up with 'em!"

Casey's head hit Niska in the stomach. He felt the fellow go over backwards. Then Casey was on the floor. He struck on his hands and knees at the same moment a gun roared in his ear.

After that guns roared in salvos. The floor shook under his hands. The cage-like room seemed to rock under the blast which thundered and reverberated from the walls. It took him a second or two to realize that he had not been hit. And he could not understand that until he looked up.

Logan and three plain-clothesmen stood just inside the inner hall at the other side of the room. Casey stared dumbly at them for an instant, then, without making any attempt to get to his feet, he turned his head and looked around.

Niska was nearest him, and he was flat on his back, gun still in his hand, a bluish, red-rimmed hole in his forehead. Klem was on his knees, his hands stretched high.

Someone was cursing behind him and he heard the thud of a fist. Logan mouthed an oath and started forward, and Casey scrambled to his feet and whirled towards the door.

Steiger was on his back. There was blood on his collar, on his vest. Casey knew the fellow was dead, knew it from sprawled limpness of the body. But Arnold was astride that fallen body.

The expressionless mask of the gambler's face was shattered. His teeth were bared, veins stood out at his temples and sweat bathed his forehead. Both hands were clenched about that lifeless neck in a frenzied, throttling grip. Wade was trying to pull Arnold away, but lacked the strength.

Logan got his hand under Arnold's right arm. He said: "Snap into it!" to Casey, and the two of them hauled the gambler from the prostrate form by sheer force. They pulled him to the davenport, dropped him there. Logan cuffed him, and after a second or two, the familiar mask began to settle over the crimson features.

"He killed Zella and Degnan," Arnold croaked. "You killed him."

"It sure looks that way," said Logan flatly.

"I wish"—Arnold hunched forward and let his hands dangle between his knees—"I wish I could have done that—myself."

"THEY had an early show at the *Regis*," Wade said, while they waited for an ambulance. "When I got out I beat it down to the *Senett*. Logan was there"—Wade glanced at the lieutenant—"and said you'd been, and gone.

"I remembered Degnan said he'd just come from his place. I thought you might be there. I saw you come out, but Mallon wasn't with you, so I figured I'd better pinch-hit for him. I called from the drug-store on the corner, called Logan at the *Senett*—thought it would be quicker than calling Headquarters."

Casey had been inspecting the remains of his camera, pawing through the case to see if Steiger had missed a plate. Now he looked up and his thick face was still moist.

"You can pinch-hit for *me* any day, kid."

"Yeah," chimed in Arnold, lifting his head from his hands, and speaking for the first time. "And you can hit for me, Flash."

Casey flushed, then scowled at Wade. "But you sure scared hell out of me—standing there in the door, alone."

"You weren't scared before, huh?" grunted Logan sardonically.

"Plenty," said Casey. "Only this was different."

"I remembered what you said about our monkey suits being decoys," Wade went on. "So I thought if I was a decoy it would give Logan a chance to get in the back way."

"And it was the kid's idea," Logan said. "He was afraid if we tried to bust in, Steiger might get kill-crazy and iron you out."

"Boy," Casey shook his head in admiration, "was I lucky!"

"Lucky?" said Wade.

"Lucky it was you that followed us here instead of Mallon." Casey spat out a curse. "I don't know where the hell he went, but he left that plate-case behind, and it looked like curtains for Arnold and me. I lost the shot I got in Zella's room, the one I got in Degnan's place.

"And now"—Casey's tone got disgusted—"I ain't even got a plate left to—"

"What of it?" asked Wade. "I still got some shots left in this candid camera." He took the tiny camera from his coat pocket. "We can blow 'em up okey—and you've got flashbulbs, haven't you?"

"Oh"—Casey put his fists on his hips, cocked one eyebrow. "Then you ain't been back to the office with your shots?"

"No. I—"

Casey chuckled, stepped over to his plate-case, took out a flashgun and bulbs. Three minutes later he had four pictures of the room, the dead men on the floor, the manacled Klem, Logan.

After that they went out and stopped in the drug-store at the corner. Casey called Blaine. The city editor's voice was cold, rasping.

"Where the hell you been? Why didn't you do what Mallon said? Do you know you've got half the police force looking for you?"

"At last, huh?" Casey growled. "Well where's Mallon?"

"He's here—now."

"Why didn't he get the cops up to Degnan's place—why didn't he take that plate-case like I told him?"

"I didn't know anything about a plate-case, but when he went out he couldn't find a cop so he got on a phone, called in here and—"

"Called you?" exploded Casey.

"Certainly. And when I got the dope, I got Headquarters and the precinct house. You were gone when they got there. Where the hell you been?"

"I'll bet Mallon took his time and gave you all the details too," Casey said bitterly.

"Listen," said Blaine. "I don't want any argument. I heard Mallon's story and—"

"You ain't heard mine."

"If you'd done what Mallon said—"

"Nerts!" shouted Casey. "I'm comin' in. Steiger hired two torpedoes to knock off Degnan and Arnold. They killed Zella Elliott. Steiger's dead. Wade and I've got the story and pictures. Now crab, damn you, crab!"

"What—"

Casey hung up before Blaine could

get the second word out. Wade was waiting in a taxi. He asked Casey what Blaine had said and Casey told him.

It was less than a ten minute ride to the *Globe* building, and Casey, slumped in his corner of the seat, made no attempt to talk. Wade, seeing the glowering cast of the older man's face, the sultry expression in his eyes, did not press his desire for conversation.

When they got out of the cab, Casey said:

"Take that camera up to Blaine and tell him what you got. I'll be up after a while."

"What're you—" stammered Wade.

"I got something I want to do—before I change my mind." Casey felt gingerly of the bump on his forehead, and he started through the entrance, a grim smile on his lips.

Wade, tagging behind, said: "Where you going?"

"Me? I'm gonna find a guy by the name of Mallon," growled Casey, "and bust him one on that precious nose for news."

"Stop the car. Easy now"

Greed Crazy

A Corpse Would Be Worth $500,000 to Him if He Could Work His Sinister Double-Cross

By George Harmon Coxe

DETECTIVE - SERGEANT JANSEN of the Central Office put the note gently on the walnut, flat-topped desk, twisted his tall, spare body in his chair, and glanced at Detective Sullivan, then across at Warren Hayward.

The note was on cheap sulphite bond; the message, neatly printed in its entirety, read:

> We made it easy at first. Just a little fee that plenty of rich guys pay for protection—$10,000. Now it'll cost you $25,000 and it's your last chance. Put an ad in the *Herald* personals this afternoon addressed to Eddy and we will tell you what to do. Either that or somebody will be paying more for you. Cross us with the cops or on the ad and you won't get a chance to pay.

"They sound kinda tough," Jansen said finally. "You got them other notes?"

"I threw the first one away," Hayward said, reaching into his pocket, "but here's the second; came last week."

Jansen studied the similarity in the

two pieces with an expression of stolid weariness which was a component part of his weathered, big-nosed face.

"What were you waitin' for?" he grunted. "They got you scared this time, so now you call us in, huh?"

Hayward pushed back in his chair behind the desk, spread his hands, palms up, let them flop back in his lap. He was a good-looking blond young man, well set up, smartly dressed in brown tweeds and immaculate linen. Healthy-skinned, blue-eyed, he had a narrow mouth and a chin that looked aggressive, as though it were accustomed to get its owner what he wanted.

"Hell," he said irritably. "I thought the first one was some crank's idea. The second one worried me—and this one, well"—his face wrinkled in a wry grin—"sure I'm scared. That's why I called you. I don't want anybody picking me up out of the gutter with a chest full of slugs. I got too much to live for."

"Everybody has," Jansen said.

"Maybe," grunted Hayward, "but I'm interested in me. I'm young, I got a job I like; I have a lot of fun. In two more years—when I'm thirty—I come into half a million. I want to be able to spend it."

"Who wouldn't?" Sullivan said and glanced sideways at Jansen, who was thoughtfully surveying the end of a thin, muddy-black stogie that smelled like the heel of an old pipe.

"You could pay, then?" the sergeant said.

"No," snorted Hayward. "I can't. And that's the hell of it, because the way I feel that's just what I'd do."

Jansen began lifting his thick brows. "You said—"

"When I was thirty, I said," Hayward interrupted. "My father died when I was a kid. His half-brother's been bringing me up—old Alvan Crocker—"

"The real estate guy?" Sullivan asked.

"Yes. Dad left about a million. The will says Crocker handles it and gets the life use of half of it; gets the use of my half till I'm thirty. Meanwhile I get a measly five thousand a year."

Sullivan sighed and shook his head. "Tough," he said sadly. "And some day you'll get it all."

"What do you want we should do?" Jansen said, folding the two notes.

"I want you to call on Crocker and tell him this thing is on the level. I told him about the second note, called him when I got this. I wanted to get an advance. But he thinks I'm trying to gouge him; says it's all poppycock. Maybe you can convince him."

"Why?" Jansen asked flatly. "It ain't my idea you should pay off?"

"Well," snapped Hayward, "see him anyway. Tell him that—"

"Well check up," Jansen said, and stood up. "The best thing is to put the ad in, find out what the layout is and then try and fix a plant."

"Hah!" Hayward stood up and scowled. "Read the end of that note again. I'm taking enough chance, just telling you about it."

"We'll check up," Jansen said, "and let you know what to do."

Hayward walked to the door, and two detectives moved down a short hall to an indirectly lighted, chromium-decorated showroom whose imitation tile floor was studded with a dozen or more glistening automobiles that actually looked bigger, more colorful, more dazzling, than the magazine advertisements.

Jansen continued to the street door, turned to speak to Sullivan, realized he was alone. He turned all the

way around before he saw that the young detective had succumbed to temptation and was standing in the center of the room, gazing awestruck at a low-slung, jade-green phaeton with an aluminum hood.

Jansen sighed wearily and moved slowly back among the glittering display, his faded black topcoat slapping at the calves of his long legs.

Sullivan was busy. He kicked the huge tires, ran his hand over the top, finally climbed in behind the wheel and worked the gears and the clutch pedal.

"What a job," he breathed reverently.

"Come on," Jansen said.

Sullivan had trouble obeying. He was a young, solidly-built fellow with a freckled, good-natured face and quick blue eyes that were now covetous and glistening.

"A Frascotto," he said, tugging at the wheel. "Italian job. I wonder what it would cost a guy to drive one."

"About ten years, Sully, if they caught you," Jansen said. "Come on before you get ideas."

Sullivan got out reluctantly. As he followed Jansen to the door he said, "Imagine selling these. Boy!"

"You'd go broke," Jansen said. "I bet there ain't twenty of 'em in town. Who's there to buy 'em nowadays?"

ALVAN CROCKER led the two detectives into the library of his home on the West Side, waved them to chairs. Sullivan sat down at once, but Jansen continued to stand for a moment as he studied the room.

It was old-looking, high-ceilinged, gloomy. Books filled two walls, and the furniture was heavy, formidable. An enormous teakwood chest, ornately carved, stood under the two tall windows at one end of the room. The top of the chest was open as though to air the contents, and a pungent odor that seemed like a combination of incense and disinfectant hung over the room.

"So he went to the police, eh?" Crocker moved behind the desk and sat down. "And I suppose he sent you here to—"

"Just checkin' up," Jansen said. He went on to tell of the conversation with Warren Hayward.

His initial feeling of dislike for Crocker grew as he studied the man and his manners. He was as tall as the sergeant, thinner, with a definite stoop. The top of his oblong head was bald and shiny; his eyes were black, intense, yet nervous; he had a hawklike nose and false teeth that did not fit too well, so that he was continually making little sucking sounds with his tongue.

"It's his own fault," he snapped when Jansen finished. "I told him. I gave him a job in my office, smoothed out the corners for him. But no. He wants bright lights and women and and a perpetual good time."

Crocker sniffed and his hueless lips dipped at the corners in familiar and well worn grooves, augmenting an attitude that suggested the world had soured on him.

"Always after me to increase his allowance. That job of selling cars! Huh! Sold one all last year—but he can buy a demonstrator at half price and swell around in it. If he stayed away from night clubs and places like that these gangsters wouldn't see him, would they? Wouldn't think of him as a victim, would they?"

Jansen fingered the brim of a felt hat that had grown limp and shapeless with constant cleaning. With no preconceived notion of suggesting the

money be paid, he found himself doing so now. He was stubborn that way, Jansen. He saw there was nothing to be gained at this end, and his argument was dryly malicious.

"I told him what he oughta do," he said flatly. "But if he wants to pay, that's his business. Plenty of 'em do. And you could advance him the money, and—"

"I could, could I?" flared Crocker. "I have to account for every penny of that estate. I'm responsible for that money and it's against my best judgment. It's poppycock. I won't do it."

"You could loan it to him," Jansen argued. "Have him sign a note and take it out of your own pocket."

"I haven't got it — of my own. Nothing but real estate. I'm overextended, hanging on for some kind of an upswing."

He stood up. "No. It's his own doing, he'll have to take it. The sooner these crooks find out he hasn't any money, the better it'll be. Why, if they get away with it once, think what might happen."

"Yeah." Jansen said dryly. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly as he moved to the door. Then, standing there with his hand on the knob he said, "If something happened to Hayward, who'd get the estate?"

"I would," Crocker said quickly. "I—"

He broke off as though realizing the implication of the question. He took a step forward, his bony face outthrust.

"See here, young man. Are you trying to insinuate—"

"I just wanted the facts," Jansen said. "In case we needed 'em some time."

He led the way out of the house and when he climbed into the battered police touring he said, "Did you hear him, Sully? Young man, he called me." He made noises in his throat. "Guys like him get my goat."

Sullivan stamped on the starter, clashed gears and literally yanked the car from the curb as he let in the clutch. "Just a nice, big-hearted, lovable old soul," he said, and took the next corner in a fast, tight turn that put the right rear wheel over the curbing.

Jansen grabbed at the door with one hand, his flapping and slightly askew hat with the other.

"Take it easy," he growled. "You're still thinkin' about that Bascatti."

"Frascotto," Sullivan said, and the freckled corners of his eyes wrinkled in a grin.

II

JANSEN'S stogies were called Little Wonders. He bought them in a round tin; fifty for eighty-nine cents. At two o'clock the following afternoon he was sitting in his office, his feet cocked on a desk drawer, cutting the end off a prospective smoke with a careful and reverent manipulation of his penknife that would have flattered a Corona Corona, when the telephone rang. Ignoring the shrill summons until he had finished his job and rolled the amputated end between his lips, he lifted the receiver.

The voice, rasping, high-pithced with excitement said:

"Hello — Jansen? Hello — hello. They got him. I got the note. They got him."

Jansen's feet thudded to the floor and he jerked upright in his chair.

"Wait a minue," he barked. "Take it easy. They got who?"

"Hayward. Hayward, damn it!"

"Hayward!" Jansen went slack-jawed a moment.

Memory flooded his brain with a detailed review of his investigation. He and Sullivan had gone back to talk with Warren Hayward the afternoon before, after they had finished with Crocker. He had endeavored to argue Hayward into inserting the advertisement in a late edition of the *Herald;* so they could try and trap the extortionist. He had also offered to furnish a police guard for a few days.

But Hayward had a date that night, said he would get in touch with Jansen in the morning. When he had not called, the sergeant had partially dismissed the case as having petered out, and because the notes had not been sent through the mail he had not notified the Federal men.

"I didn't get the letter till an hour ago," Crocker whined. "The housekeeper found it, called me at the office. Warren wasn't at his office, hadn't been in. He wasn't at the club last night. Didn't sleep home, but his car is here. I don't know—"

"Hold everything," Jansen said. "I'll get a flock of men and—"

"No," cried Crocker. "You can't do that—"

"What the hell do you mean I can't?"

"This note. It says if I tell the police I'll be killed. They want fifty thousand. I'll pay—I've got to pay. But I'm afraid to do it alone. You've got to help me. But you've got to promise not to tell anyone until—"

"How can I promise?" growled Jansen. "I gotta tell the Captain."

"You can't, I tell you! I won't let you in the house—won't tell you anything more. I can't take the chance. But if you don't help me and something happens I'll see to it that the District Attorney—"

Crocker went on, half hysterically, but Jansen did not hear him for the moment, so busy was he with his own thoughts. Duty according to the regulations was clear. But a man like Crocker carried some weight about town. And if anything went wrong—

Jansen was in a spot either way, but he made his decision quickly.

"All right," he said, interrupting Crocker's tirade. "I won't spill it—anyway until I talk with you. Sullivan and me'll be right up."

"Not in a police car," Crocker said. "The note says I'll be watched and if I go to the police, or any police come to my house the deal is off and I'll be—"

Jansen spat out a curse. "All right, all right," he said. "Take it easy. Stay right there. We'll figure out someway to get in without tipping our mitt. Sit tight."

"You'll be careful?" Crocker quaked. "I'm taking a terrible chance just calling you. You won't—"

Jansen slammed down the receiver on the rush of words. He glanced at the stogie, its outer wrapping now flapping wide, cursed and threw it at the spittoon. Striding to the lone window he looked out on the busy street below.

"Is he yellow; boy, is he yellow!" he muttered savagely. "And gettin' me to spot myself to help him out. Am I a magician or something to sneak up there and—"

He broke off as his eyes flicked over the street to the row of three and four-storied brick buildings opposite. Hardware, grocery store, news-stand, plumber—

"Yah!" he growled and spun away from the window. Leaving his topcoat on the hatrack, he went into the hall, called Sullivan from the de-

tective's room, hurried downstairs to the garage in the basement.

HERE he told Sullivan what had happened. They purloined two suits of greasy overalls, one sweater, a blue jacket. They went across the street to the plumbing shop. Jansen did not have to argue long with the owner, because the sergeant was two parking tags up in favors.

Five minutes later a battered truck with a tool bag in the open box body and *Empire Plumbing Co.* lettered on the tail board bounced out of the alley. The truck took the intersection on orange and red, squeezed in front of a limousine by the grace of God and the other chauffeur's locked brakes, nicked a taxi fender and roared on down the middle of the street.

Jansen's pent-up breath whistled out and he jerked his eyes from the road to Sullivan's bright-eyed face.

"Listen, Sully," he said sardonically. "It's plumbers we are, ain't it?"

"Sure," Sullivan said, holding the throttle open. "And a swell idea, too."

"Then don't spoil it. Slow down so's we can be like other plumbers."

Alvan Crócker began to voice his fears as soon as Jansen and Sullivan—lugging the tool bag—came in the back way.

The sergeant interrupted, asked for the note. It was identical with the other two. Sullivan read it over Jansen's shoulder.

It asked for fifty thousand dollars, gave explicit directions for the delivery, made the usual threats if the police were informed or the money not paid. The servants were to be dismissed for the evening, and Crocker himself was to make the delivery, leaving the house at ten o'clock and driving Warren Hayward's distinctive Frascotto roadster, which was now in the garage behind the house.

"If the car is here," Sullivan said, "They musta snatched him last night when he put it away."

"You gonna get the money?" Jansen said.

"Yes," Crocker said, "I hardly know—"

"Then you better get going," Jansen said. "before three." He hesitated. "We can't go with you—a couple would-be plumbers." He scratched the back of his neck, tugged at the brim of his borrowed cap, finally added, "Call up the bank and send your housekeeper for it. It oughta be safe enough that way."

Crocker apparently had no stomach for further argument at the moment. He dispatched the housekeeper, and when she returned a half hour later the three men went into the library.

Crocker began to count the money, bending low over the desk, his long fingers deftly dealing the old twenties asked for in the note. He was about half way through this task when he said:

"I've taken enough chances already, telling you about this. I don't like—I mean, those men will have me at their mercy if I go out alone to deliver this." He sucked at his loose false teeth and they wiggled with the sucking. "Why can't you go in my place?"

His beady, nervous eyes caught Jansen's, held them. And the sergeant felt a slowly-rising anger within him at the sight of the man's obvious fear, his cringing attitude. Yet he also realized that the idea was clever. It would give him an actual contact with the kidnapers; his experience, his

powers of observation should give him some sort of a clue that would help in running down the men when Hayward was safe.

"You're the same build," Sullivan said. "And you got the same kind of noses and—"

"I always wear a black felt hat," Crocker interrupted eagerly. "And my gray coats are—ah—quite distinctive. You could easily—"

"Okay," Jansen said. "But get this. Me, I don't like all this clownin' around. Plumbers and all that stuff. I'll deliver the cash, but the way to handle it is to shut off the roads out there, plant a couple of squads of men—"

"No—no," Crocker said fearfully.

"These guys are smart," Jansen said. "Look at the place they pick for the touch. Damn near ten miles out of town, out there by the old airport where there ain't a tree, nothing you can hide in for miles. But we could block the roads—"

"You promised—"

"I promised I wouldn't spill anything till I talked with you."

"If we don't play fair, they'll kill Warren—me, too," Crocker said, and the emphasis was on the, "Me, too."

"Well, just the same," Jensen began and then broke off. Exasperation filmed his lean face and he continued irritably, "Sully's a witness that I'm only doin' this because—"

"That's fine," Crocker breathed. He continued counting the money. When he finished he said, "Do you think—I mean, maybe we could make a dummy bag, not have to give up all this money?"

"Sure," Jansen said bitterly, "and then all they'll do is crack down on me and put the slug on Hayward. If you wanta take a chance with him let's cut out the run around, get some cops out there and maybe we can trap the whole gang."

"No," Crocker sighed. "It's a lot of money, and it's Warren's own damn fault. But maybe we can get it back afterwards."

Sullivan glanced at Jansen, shook his head and wrinkled his nose in disgust.

Jansen stood up. "Let's look at the garage."

III

THEY went through the back hall, out the door and across a wide paved court into a spacious triple garage that now held a single car, a black and chromium Frascotto roadster with the top down.

Sullivan went dumb with admiration. Jansen turned to Crocker.

"We got to haul out of here pretty soon—even plumbers can't stay too long. I'll come over this fence"—he pointed to the brick wall at the rear of the garage—"at exactly five minutes of ten tonight.

"At 9:57 you bring out your hat and coat and the money and put it in the car for me. That way nobody'll get a chance to see us together and get wise—and nobody'll get a chance to lift the money bag. Now you better get rid of the servants. We'll be in and get our tool bag soon's we look around."

When the two detectives came into the library a few minutes later, Crocker was not around, and Jansen said:

"Listen, Sully, am I in a spot! Will I be the sap, if this thing flops and I don't get something to hang on these snatchers. The captain'll say I shoulda tipped off the whole force, and—"

"What the hell," Sullivan said. "If

we tip 'em off and they pick up the kid's body tomorrow we'll be in a spot, too."

The "we" did not escape Jansen and his eyes showed fleeting appreciation.

"Okay, we'll give it a whirl," he said. "I gotta meet these guys right in the middle of that four-mile stretch of road, and you can't hide on it. But there's a crossroad right near there; you know, dirt; goes up a little hill. There's some woods there and you won't be much more'n a half mile away. I think you can stick there, and if you take another guy with you—Werber, maybe—only don't tell him why—and a sub-machine gun and a riot gun and—"

"I wish I was built like you," Sullivan said irrelevantly.

"You wish?" grunted Jansen, scowling.

"Imagine drivin' that Frascotto."

THERE seemed to be but one light in Crocker's house—at the front—when Jansen climbed the brick fence and tiptoed across the paved court at five minutes of ten that night. The leather money valise was tucked up on the floor-boards under the dash; a coat and a hat lay on the seat of the roadster. Jansen changed in the darkness, climbed in behind the wheel. Fumbling with the unfamiliar and cluttered instrument board for a minute or more, he finally had to strike a match to find the light switch. It was a full two minutes longer before he discovered the ignition under the steering column, and he was sweating with exasperation at the unlooked-for delay.

The right hand drive confused him and he narrowly missed the side of the house as he went jerking down the driveway. It was not until he had passed the suburbs that he became at all confident of his ability to operate the heavy car.

Then he realized he was shivering. The sweat had become a film of ice, he thought; and he cursed Crocker and his thin coat; Hayward for getting himself kidnaped, for having the top down on the roadster.

Soon he was starting along the flat straight road that led past the old airport, abandoned now because the land was too marshy. A moon helped him realize that his visualisation of the terrain that afternoon had been correct. It was as if he were surveying the district through dark blue glasses, and he could see that there was hardly a tree within sight. In the distance, topping a gentle rise to the left, a fuzzy skyline told him of the wooded section more than a half mile away. Somewhere up there was a road. He'd pass the intersection in another mile and Sully'd be up there waiting. Sully and Werber.

It was funny, though. There wasn't another car in sight. Maybe he was early. No. A glance at the clock on the dash told him he was late if anything—and all because of this damn Italian car with all its gadgets.

Maybe s o m e t h i n g scared the snatchers off. His thoughts stuck here for a moment. If they didn't show up it meant it was a gag, or that somebody got wise. A new and chilling uneasiness seeped into his brain. And there was his lieutenancy. He was looking forward to that in a few years.

Jansen was conscious first of a peculiar jar. It was faint, but definite, and he could not explain it. It served to pull his thoughts to the moment, gave him a few seconds of warning that were wasted.

He half turned in his seat. Then the gun—he could tell it was a gun by the cold roundness of the muzzle—jabbed against the back of his neck. A hoarse, muffled voice said:

"Stop the car! Easy, now!"

Jansen stiffened. Instinct put his feet on the clutch and brake pedals. He pulled over to the side of the road, automatically snapped off the ignition.

"Now, just open the bag so I can make sure."

Jansen reached for the bag, fumbled with the fastenings. Two thoughts cropped out from the jumble in his brain: the fellow had been in the rumble seat from the start; and he was staging his coup ahead of time. The appointed spot was a half mile away, the intersecting road a quarter of a mile beyond that.

"He crossed us. Wouldn't come himself. Sent a copper, huh?" the voice said.

Jansen opened the bag, but his eyes were sweeping the dusky blue landscape. It was the man behind him who made the discovery.

A vicious, outraged curse jerked the sergeant's attention to the bag. Then his breath caught in his throat. The valise was filled with folded newspapers. The other man's voice pounded at his ears.

"You —— You crossed me!"

"No!" Jansen said, too dumfounded to feel fear as yet. "I thought—"

"He got it from the bank," the voice rasped. "We checked."

"I thought the dough was there," Jansen flung out. "He musta switched. It's the truth. He musta—"

"The two of you crossin' me, huh?" The pressure of the gun was steady, but the voice moved as the man told Jansen to shove over and then climbed down on the seat behind the wheel. Reaching for the ignition switch he said, "All right. We told him what we'd do. Here's where we make good on it."

Jansen glanced at the man at his side for the first time. A long black handkerchief with slits cut for the eyes, hung from under a dark felt. A long slicker covered the man's clothing. Beyond this Jansen could not see, but his nose wrinkled as it picked up a strange and enigmatic scent, strange, yet somehow familiar.

The gunman let out the clutch with a jerk, drove over a shallow ditch to the adjoining field, making a quick, wide circle back to the road. Gaining this he jabbed Jansen with the gun.

"Open the door!" he said.

Jansen obeyed, trying to judge the speed of the car. It wasn't much, but—

The gun slammed against the back of his head. Half-conscious that he was falling, he jumped. A voice that sounded strangely dim called:

"Here's where you get out."

Then he struck the macadam on his feet and pitched forward into the opposite ditch.

The racing car was already a quarter of a mile away when Jansen staggered to the middle of the road, but he fired twice regardless. He did not hope to hit the man; but he seized upon this method as the simplest for summoning Sullivan.

IV

SULLIVAN, hunched over the wheel, said, "Imagine chasing a Frascotto in this crate! Those jobs're guaranteed to do a hundred and ten."

"You just open her—and keep her open!" said Jansen.

"We can't help Hayward much right now. But the money's at Crocker's. We might save his yellow, double-crossing hide if—"

"Yeah," Jansen said grimly. He remembered that peculiar smell of the kidnaper now, and he told of his discovery. "You know that funny incense smell that came from that big chest in Crocker's library yesterday?" Sullivan said he had. Werber grunted. Jansen went on hurriedly. "Well, this snatcher had that smell."

"Crocker? You think he was hidin' there?" Sullivan broke off with a curse. "Then he knew I was waitin' up in the woods; that's why he pulled the job ahead of time. And nobody knew about that but us. He was hidin' in that chest, listenin' to every word."

"He crossed us on the dough." Jansen said, as though talking to himself.

"Remember?" Sullivan continued excitedly. "Crocker wasn't around when we came in from the garage—when we went in the library and talked this setup over! He was hidin' there. It was a frame from the start.

"He phoned us in the first place so there'd be an excuse if Hayward was found dead. He suggested you go in his place—so he could hide in the rumble. He crossed us on the dough and his gag is to make you open the bag so you can swear there's no cash. That gives him a chance to get the kid knocked off, have him found dead someplace. Everybody'll blame Crocker for holding back the ransom—but what the hell does he care? He stands to make a half million. We gotta find Hayward before—"

"Yeah," Jansen said. There was a peculiar brittleness to his voice now, as though he had not paid much attention to what Sullivan had said.

"If a guy goes nuts and goes around framing jobs like this it's okay with me. But when he builds me up for the sap, that's different," Jansen went on.

The touring was racing along the avenue now, and the sergeant turned to Werber. "We'll park outside the house. Get that riot gun set and if anybody comes runnin' out let him have it."

Sullivan stopped the touring car with one front wheel over the curb and the bumper against a telephone pole. Jansen's long legs kept him in the lead. He went through the darkened hall to the lighted living room, threw open the library door and barged in with his gun up.

He was poised there, breathless, his eyes riveted on the macabre picture on the floor when Sullivan ran into him. The young detective's husky oath stirred the hair on Jansen's neck.

Alvan Crocker, his bony face relaxed and placid in death, lay on his back in the center of the room, his arms outflung, his knees bent and twisted sideways at the hip. The fabric of his vest was moist, red-stained by blood from two holes in his chest. Jansen saw this at a glance, catalogued it and forgot it. Because there was a piece of paper on the man's stomach, and it was this which held his bright, hard gaze.

One step took him to the body. He did not have to kneel to read the message. Across the top of the sheet, printed in large letters, were two words: DOUBLE-CROSSER.

Beneath this smaller letters spelled out: *We keep our word both ways. We got the money and the kid can go.*

"Still tryin' to bluff, huh?" Jansen said. He stooped and ran his finger across the face of the paper, so that he made a bluish smudge.

Sullivan, wide-eyed and slack-jawed with amazement, blurted:

"Who?"

Jansen straightened up. "The ink's still wet. Maybe he's still around."

"Who? Damn it, who?"

"Hayward!" ripped Jansen, and was jerked to stiffness by the low roar of an automobile engine which shattered the stillness of the night.

ACTION was synonymous with thought. He sprang towards the window overlooking the driveway, seemed to unlock and throw it up with one quick, continuous movement. Then, leaning out, bracing himself with one hand, he whipped up his gun, fired once, quickly, at the darkened roadster outlined in the moonlight.

Instantly the sound of the motor faded. There was a grinding clash of gears, a new roar and the car shot backward. Jansen called:

"Let's go, Sully," and went through the window.

At the entrance to the courtyard, he flattened himself against the corner of the house, yanked the racing Sullivan to a stop.

"Take it easy," he whispered. "Go around the right side here, stay outside the door. I'll be goin' in. If he comes out alone you better get him the first shot."

"But listen," Sullivan said. "Why don't I—"

"Why don't you do what you're told?" Jansen said, and gave the young detective a shove. Then, as soon as Sullivan reached the far wall, the sergeant stepped warily towards the roadster, which had been left in the center of the court.

He saw that it was empty, and crouching, he leaped for the shelter of the garage. He slid along the front of the building, reached the first, jutting half of the opened door. Pausing here for a moment, he listened, risked a glance beyond. The blackness of the interior swallowed up his gaze. There was no sound but his own breathing.

Jansen made his decision at once. A fast moving target was the thing; better that way than try to sneak in with the moonlight at his back.

He went to one knee, took a deep breath, then launched his attack like a charging football lineman. He shot up and forward into blackness, took two long steps, threw himself towards the safe shadows of the right wall.

Twice in that quick rush a gun roared. The first shot shattered a glass pane in the door; the second slapped into the brick wall. Chips and dust showered down on his hand. After that there was silence, thick, ominous, deadly. Jansen waited on one knee, trying to pierce the blackness.

The first seconds were anxious, nerve-tingling. He heard a faint sound of movement off to his right. Then the tension began to grow and he became conscious of his cramped, taut-muscled position. He began to breath through his mouth, easing the air in and out silently. Then, in shifting one hand, he touched a tire which was propped against the wall.

He decided to gamble. One handed, braced there one one knee, he pulled the tire from the wall. When he had it headed across the width of the garage, he brought over his gun-hand to help.

A quick, noiseless shove started the tire on its way. Jansen brought up his gun, made ready to shoot in any direction. For five seconds or so the movement of the tire was barely perceptible, with a noise so faint as to defy

analysis. Then it hit the opposite wall with a crash that seemed deafening after the silence.

Things happened with lightning quickness then; yet each detail was etched in Jansen's brain as though unfolded in slow motion.

Hayward shot at the crash. So close was he that the gun seemed to explode in Jansen's ears. As he swung his arm over, Hayward fired again. This time the flash of orange flame threw out an instantaneous picture of the strong-chinned face in profile, of a figure crouched with his back against the wall not four feet from Jansen.

He could have shot him then, Jansen could. Why he didn't he never could explain—except that he thought he had a chance to make an arrest, and he had been drilled to shoot only when no other course was possible.

So he took off from his knee again. The onslaught was accurate, but too forceful. His shoulder hit Hayward squarely and the two of them went over on the floor in a tangle of arms and legs. But Hayward, although taken by surprise, had youth in his favor. He threw Jansen clear, scrambled to his feet. When the sergeant rolled over, Hayward was halfway to the door.

Jansen's gun came up again, and this time his trigger finger was tight. He yelled a warning. At the same time he remembered Sullivan. He yelled again, then squeezed the trigger as Hayward swung through the doorway.

Beyond the flash of his gun, he saw another flash—from Hayward's gun. Mingling with the crash of his shot, were two others, and he knew one was Sullivan's. Then Hayward was a silhouette. A blue-hued silhouette who held a gun in one hand, a bulky valise in the other. And the silhouette sagged as Jansen watched; sagged, and dropped the valise and then crumpled over on top of it.

V

SULLIVAN paced back and forth across the library floor, muttering, "Hell—hell!" and with each turn, glancing at the lifeless figure of Alvan Crocker. They were waiting for the ambulance and the examiner now, and Werber was outside standing guard over Hayward's body.

Jansen, bare-headed and disheveled, was looking at the two leather bags on the floor, one of which was stuffed with newspapers, the other filled with old twenty-dollar bills.

"I figured it was Crocker," Sullivan said and scowled. "I thought you did, too."

"What made you think so, Sully?"

"Well, hell!" Sullivan pulled at one ear. "I doped out all those motives. How he could've framed it and everything, and you didn't argue."

"I was thinkin' about something else," Jansen answered. "I might've heard your motives, but most of 'em would stick with Hayward, too. He stood to get the million, same as as Crocker. He coulda been in the chest all the time—instead of just while we were talking about the plant for you and Werber."

Jansen hesitated, stepped to the window, looked out, same back to the center of the room again.

"Hayward was hard up. He wouldn't get his half million for two years. So he doped up this plan to kidnap himself, and he made it look right because he knew old Crocker would never pay for extortion letters. And if the money had been in that bag tonight, he probably would've got away with it.

"He had a car we couldn't catch. He could've ditched it, hid the cash and turned up with a bump on his head or something— wandering about like he'd just been turned loose. If he'd stuck to his story—and he was the kind of guy that would—he'd been clear. We'd never hooked him even if we tied him up with it. And he'd had fifty grand to tide him over till he got his estate."

"He musta been nerts," Sullivan broke in.

"Yeah," Jansen said thoughtfully. "Anyway, off his nut about one thing! He had plenty of dough coming, but he couldn't touch it—and he liked a good time.

"He got a crazy idea of getting fifty thousand from Crocker. And Crocker was crazy too; greed crazy. So tight he crossed himself out of this world." The kid thought the money was in that bag. When it wasn't he came straight back to get it.

Jansen walked over to the chest now open.

"Just wrote a note," he said slowly, "left it where the housekeeper could find it, then made himself comfortable here. Then sometime tonight he sneaked out and got in the rumble seat.

"Neat. And the only thing we know is that the job flopped. Two guys with a half million each—and now nobody gets it. A million bucks, Sully; a million dollar flop."

"Yeah," Sullivan said.

"But I coulda been right. Crocker coulda framed a snatch, too. That smell you tumbled to; either one of 'em coulda hid in that chest."

"Sure."

"Then how the hell'd you tumble to Hayward?"

"You never drove one of them Bascattis, did you, Sully?"

"Frascotto," Sullivan grumbled. "No."

"Know where the ignition switch is?"

"I could damn well find it."

"So did I. But it took about three minutes."

"What's that prove?"

"There ain't many cars around like that, Sully. And for some damn reason—because I was rattled I guess—I turned off the switch. And from where he was in the rumble, this guy couldn't see me do it. But when he got ready to haul out he reached for the damn thing without even looking at it. So what would you make out of that fact, Sully?"

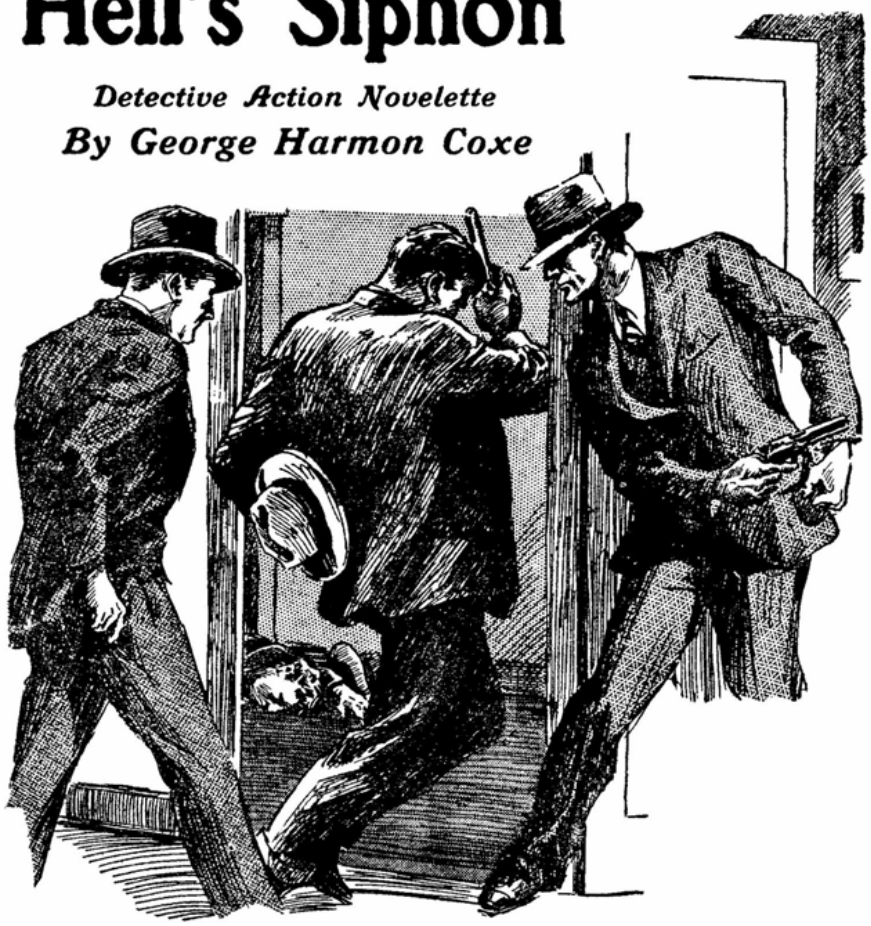
"Well—" Sullivan said, and a grin flooded his round, freckled face. "It had to be Hayward—or some guy that was plenty familiar with the job to turn it on without looking."

Headquarters Detective, September 1936

Hell's Siphon

Detective Action Novelette

By George Harmon Coxe



Hell's lid blew off when Detective Nason found his old buddy, Patrolman Donigan, had been shot in the back. But doom's worst stroke was to discover hot jewels on the copper's corpse. And when Nason triggered to clear Donigan's name, he was piloting himself toward another dishonored grave.

CHAPTER I
Death For One

THE police touring car stopped with a jerk and both front doors swung wide. Jack Nason, First Grade Detective from the Central Office, slid from under the wheel, ran around behind the car and sprinted into the black mouth of the alley a stride or two in back of Detective Carrigan who had leaped to the sidewalk from the opposite door.

Racing heels clicked on the cobblestone flooring, echoed hollowly from unseen walls until Nason jerked out his pocket flashlight. Then a yellow cone stabbed the darkness, picking out a vague, dark-suited form fifty feet beyond.

The form took shape as he pounded on, and the rays of the flashlight picked out metal buttons, a badge, a whitish oval that became the face of Sergeant Kenny of the precinct station.

"In here," Kenny said, holstering his gun and pushing on a door at his side.

An orange rectangle slashed across the alley floor and up the grimy brick wall opposite. Kenny

stepped into the light and the brogue of his ancestors was in his thick voice.

"Alpert's jewelry store. It's Donigan—and Sam Steig."

Nason said: "Donigan?" incredulously; then repeated the word in hollow tones as he pushed into the room with Carrigan at his heels.

A single overhead bulb made the enclosure—a storeroom filled with cardboard cartons and dusty shelves—all highlights and shadows. Kenny continued to a doorway beyond and stepped aside.

A canvas curtain which closed off the front of the store had been dropped a foot or so in front of a huge wall safe. Nearby was a long table, flanked by three chairs. On the floor, one outflung hand hidden by the shadow of the table, sprawled the body of Sam Steig.

Nason saw him but vaguely. His eyes, his thoughts, were on a second crumpled and inert form a few feet away; a young-looking, curly-headed figure who wore the blue of a police uniform.

"When Donigan didn't ring in"—Kenny nodded at the uniformed figure—"I came out to look for him." The voice seemed chagrined. "Thought maybe he was celebrating again. He was workin' off some punishment duty for being drunk a while back."

Nason said: "Donigan," again. Spoke the word in an absent, toneless voice.

It wasn't just the macabre picture of death. He'd seen enough of this sort of thing to accept it as part of his job. But Donigan—this was different. He'd been to Police Academy with Donigan. Lately, since Nason had been moved to the detective bureau at headquarters, their paths had not crossed so frequently. But they were still friends. Donigan—warmhearted, happy-go-lucky Irishman.

Nason cast aside his bitter thoughts with an effort and knelt beside his friend, felt for a pulse, dropped the limp wrist. Turning, but without getting off his one knee, he searched for a spark of life in the other man. Suddenly he muttered an oath.

"This guy's still alive." He looked at Carrigan. "Get on the phone. When you finish get Alpert down here."

KENNY pushed aside the canvas curtain and went into the front part of the store with Carrigan. Nason, concentrating on his new job now, made a careful inspection of the space behind the curtain.

The safe had been opened. In place of the combination was a gaping hole; around this the metal looked as if it had been sprayed with blue-gray paint, the result of the intense heat of the acetylene torch which, with its torpedo-like fuel container, stood nearby.

His ordinarily good-natured face was grim as he stood there, a well set-up fellow of average height; young, competent, clean-looking. After a moment he took off his hat and opened his topcoat. He ran a forefinger around the inside of the damp sweatband, and the shadows cast by his straight brows made his eyes as black as his hair.

Finally he replaced the hat and gave his attention to the man beside the table, recalled what he knew about the fellow.

Sam Steig was the sort of individual who, in a small town, would hang around the pool room and corner drugstore. He was a big man, about thirty-five; a former second-rate boxer. After leaving the ring he had become a bodyguard. And for the past six months he had been working as nightwatchman and guard for Alpert's jewelry store.

Nason dropped beside the limp figure and opened the coat, and a vest that was sodden with blood. Steig had been shot twice in the chest and only the closest scrutiny revealed the faint movement of the breast that hoarded the spark of life.

Carrigan and Kenny came back behind the canvas curtain. Paying them no attention, Nason moved to Donigan's body and unbuttoned the tunic. He saw then that the policeman had been shot in the back. There was no hole in the chest and the bullet was still in the body. And the service revolver was still in its holster.

"He never had a chance to use it," he said grimly.

"Well, that's damn funny," Kenny growled.

Nason's deft fingers continued their exploration until they touched a tissue paper packet in the breast pocket of the shirt. Withdrawing this, he unfolded the paper until with startling suddenness, his palm was filled with a half-dozen unset diamonds that glittered and sparkled in the tepid light of the room.

For an interminable moment no one spoke. Nason felt his nerves jerk taut as his jaw sagged. Finally Kenny cursed once and Carrigan wheezed:

"For hell's sake, what—"

"Take a look at Steig's gun!" Nason snapped. "How many times was it fired?"

When Kenny said: "Once," Nason stood up. He did not speak for a moment, but there was a weird curve to his lips that pulled them back against his teeth.

"His gun was in his holster," Carrigan said slowly, in the absent tones of a man talking to himself, "and those stones in an inside pocket—" His voice got thin and hard. "Hell, you don't think he—"

"Who cares what I think?" Nason said bitterly. "Get on the phone. It'll be plenty of grief no matter how you figure it."

LIEUTENANT FITZPATRICK was a lanky, red-headed, sharp-tongued cop with cold gray eyes and a lean, hawk-like face that was twisted in a scowl as he spoke to the ambulance interne.

"Well, how about it? Is he gonna live? Do we get to talk to him?"

The interne, a sandy-haired fellow with glasses, shrugged in a gesture of weariness.

"I don't think he's got a chance, no. But he might come around for a while."

The examiner's physician, who had been making an inspection of Donigan's body, extended a partly-flattened lead slug to Fitzpatrick.

"This one was easy," he said bruskly. "Just under the skin above the heart."

Fitzpatrick weighted the bullet in his palm, scowled down at it and said nothing. As the examiner's man began to pack his bag, Nason said:

"I'd have somebody from Ballistics check that with Steig's gun."

The lieutenant's brows arched above cold gray eyes. "You think Steig shot him? Why?"

"We looked the room over. There's no sign of any other slug. And there's no blood. Steig shot at something. If he'd hit one of the guys that cracked the box we ought to see some blood. If he missed we would've found the bullet."

Fitzpatrick's forehead was like a washboard. He said nothing, watched the ambulance assistants put Steig on a stretcher, until the back door banged open and footsteps scurried across the floor.

Moe Alpert rushed through the narrow inner doorway an instant later and came to an abrupt stop just across the threshold. He was plump, curly-headed, smartly dressed, with a diamond as big as his knuckle winking from a little finger. His face was sweaty, fatty, with the look of a man who lives and eats well but not too wisely.

As he burst into excited speech, directing his remarks to Fitzpatrick, Nason watched him and made an effort to recall the man's history.

Aside from one breath of suspicion which tagged him "fence" some years ago, his record was clean. There was no black mark against his name, and for the past five years he had made money in this jewelry store which specialized in installment selling; made money, friends, and lived the life of a man who likes bright lights and entertainment.

"You got any insurance?" Fitzpatrick was saying.

"No—no. Most of my stuff is cheap—for the fifty cents a week buyer." Alpert took off his derby and nervously wiped sweat from his glistening forehead and the bald spot at his crown. "But some things I have are worth money. Diamonds that—"

"Then how come you didn't insure 'em?"

"Too expensive," groaned Alpert. "Until these jewel breaks started six months ago, I didn't need insurance. Then"—his shrewd eyes narrowed as he surveyed Fitzpatrick—"all the time I think you fellows will get the crooks. So I hire Steig—until you do get 'em."

"Nuts!" rapped Fitzpatrick. He glared around the dim confines of the room and continued as though talking to himself. "Three jewel breaks in six months. Each one as clean as a whistle. And now this."

He took the packet of diamonds Nason had turned over to him from his breast pocket, held them up for Alpert to see.

"These yours?" he growled.

Alpert blinked, extended a trembling hand. "I don't know. I'll see." He started for the safe, but the lieutenant grabbed his arm.

"Never mind—now. They're yours all right." He swore once, then told the story he and Nason had pieced together in short, clipped sentences.

Alpert said: "Oh—" which was all he could manage for the moment.

"Check up and see if anything else is missing," Fitzpatrick ordered. "And keep your mouth shut till we find out where we are."

He started to curse again, broke off suddenly, said: "What a smell this'll make if it's what I'm thinking it might be. Diamonds in his pocket, his gun in his holster and the nightwatchman's bullet in

his back."

CHAPTER II
Camera For Death

THEY stood around the bed in that bare hospital room, Alpert, Fitzpatrick, Carrigan and Nason, and watched the house surgeon turn away from the still form of Sam Steig.

"I've done all I dare do now."

"But"—Fitzpatrick scowled and his voice was arbitrary—"can't you give him a shot in the arm or something, so maybe he can talk?"

"It would be fatal." The surgeon moved towards the door. "As it is, he has a chance. In a few hours"—the man spread his hands—"he may be able to talk—safely."

The surgeon shut the door gently as he went out.

Alpert rubbed his hands and shook his head sadly. "I guess I'll go home now. Is there anything more I can do to—"

"It'd be a break for the force," Fitzpatrick said, "if you didn't tell the reporters all you knew. Tell 'em to come to me till we find out where we are."

Alpert said: "Sure," and went out.

Nason leaned against the wall beside the door and watched Steig, his mind busy with the details that had come to light since they had left the jewelry store. Alpert had stated that aside from the diamonds found on Donigan, there was another package of stones missing, worth about forty thousand dollars.

Nason's thoughts checked when a nurse entered the room and said there was a telephone call for Fitzpatrick. The lieutenant was gone but a minute, and when he re-entered the room he said: "That does it," bitterly.

"The slug we got from Donigan was fired from Steig's gun." He began to pace the floor. "Donigan was hard up, and he wasn't in such good standing. Drunk in uniform a while back, and for that he got twenty days suspension and one hundred and twenty hours of punishment duty. I wish to hell they'd kicked him off the force."

Nason's face flushed and he checked an angry reply. He did not speak until he had his emotions under control. Then he said, stubbornly: "Donigan was no crook. I knew him."

Fitzpatrick gave him a scornful glance. "Nobody could've broken in that store if Steig didn't want to open up. But he knew Donigan, and he'd open up for him. And then Donigan must've held him up and let the gang in with the torch. One of the hoods shot Steig. They probably thought he was dead.

"They went to work on the safe, got the diamonds and gave Donigan his cut. They probably beat it and left Donigan behind to *discover* the break and give the alarm. But they muffed one thing. Steig wasn't dead. He had enough left to pull his gun and shoot Donigan when he wasn't looking."

"There'll be another way to figure it," Nason said grimly.

"If there is, we'd better find it. Because if we don't the press'll play it as it looks. Three slick jewel breaks. It'll be tough enough without smearing a crooked cop over the front page. But—" He threw up his hands, let them slap against his thighs.

"You two"—he nodded to Nason and Carrigan—"stay here. Steig's our best chance. One of you stick in the room all the time."

NASON paced the floor for several minutes after Fitzpatrick left. Carrigan was in the corridor outside the door, ready to answer any telephone calls, or witness anything Steig might say if he recovered consciousness. After a while, Nason stepped over to the chair on the other side of the bed and stared down at Steig's clothing which had been draped over the chair back. With no particular motive in mind, he began to search the pockets.

He found a knife, some loose keys, two dollar bills and a handful of change. There was a dirty handkerchief, a crumpled pack of cigarettes, a folder of matches, a bill from a dry-cleaning establishment. There was just one piece of jewelry—a watch.

Nason inspected it idly. It was of the thick, elaborately engraved style in vogue some years ago. He pressed on the stem to open the front lid; then, prompted by idle curiosity, he wedged his thumbnail in the back and pried open the case.

Stuck there loosely was a photograph which was cut to fit the case, a photograph of Steig and a tall girl who stood close together on some beach, an arm around each other's waist. The girl's face was vaguely familiar, but Nason could not place it at the moment, so he grunted softly, replaced the watch, keeping the picture. Walking around the bed, he pulled up the other chair and sat down.

He watched Steig, but his thoughts were of Donigan. He was still young enough, Nason was, to have a few illusions; and he found it hard to make himself believe the story as Fitzpatrick saw it. There were crooked cops; there would always be crooked cops. Nason knew that. In any body of men the size of the city force, there was bound to be some chiselers, men of little honor or scruples. These, in the course of events, were generally weeded out; were dismissed, or left of their own accord.

But Donigan— The drunkenness episode was different. Nason had talked with him afterward, had thought it was just what Donigan needed to teach him a lesson. He was an orphan. But there was a younger sister Donigan was putting through school. He was young, a bit wild, and full of the joy of living.

Voices in the hall checked his reverie. He moved to the door as a knock sounded and Carrigan said:

"Hey, Jack. There's a button-pusher from the *Courier* out here."

Nason put his hand on the knob, hesitated, his lean face cracked in a scowl.

He had long since learned that the press was both an asset and a liability—depending on whether the representative was for you, or against you. Even when he could not give out information he knew enough to kid the reporters and cameramen along.

Right now, irritation gripped him. He did not want to be bothered; he did not intend to allow any pictures taken. But these photographers had a job to do, and it paid to be decent. He opened the door.

Nason did not recognize the man who stood in the opening. He was a tall, well-dressed youth with a pimply face and a tiny mustache. His voice, when he spoke, was thin, feminine.

"How about a picture?"

"No."

"Just one shot. What the hell. Give a guy a break."

"No." Nason's dark eyes flashed from the youth's face to the camera in his hand, to the bulky plate case slung over one shoulder. "No pictures. If anything breaks you'll get it along with the rest of the boys."

Nason hesitated, instinct flashing a vague warning. His brows drew down and his voice got hard, skeptical. "You must be new at the *Courier*. Got a card?"

"Sure." The youth let the plate case slip from his shoulder, and as he spoke his hand went into his coat pocket and came out with the familiar yellow police card issued *Courier* men. On it was pasted the miniature photograph of the owner, and Nason glanced down at it as the fellow pushed by him and stepped into the room.

Nason instinctively put out a hand to bar the youth's progress. His eyes were still on the photographer's card, and he stiffened and felt an instantaneous tingling at his nerve ends at what he saw.

The picture on the police card showed a man who wore glasses.

What happened after that could not have taken more than two or three seconds. Yet it was as though time stood still, so detailed was the action in his brain.

HE was dimly conscious of another bulkier figure slipping into the doorway as he spun towards the pimply-faced youth. Then the fellow dropped the camera, and his hand, a blur of motion, held a heavy automatic against Nason's side.

"Steady, punk! This'll rip a big hole in you."

Nason's brain stuck on his first thought: The other men in the diamond robbery—come back to make sure there was no witness. He went cold, then hot again as despair, then rage, gripped him. After that he moved instinctively, without conscious thought.

His hand whipped to the automatic in his side and his hot fingers gripped the cold steel. He twisted with catlike quickness and the youth cursed. Then the movement behind him, from that bulkier shape at the door, flashed a warning which came too late.

Something hard smashed down on his head. He felt his knees buckle and his pain-ridden brain gripped one thought—where was Carrigan?

Nason hit the floor on his hands and knees. He was still partly conscious; he heard voices that sounded thin and far away, voices that were choked off in a roar that pounded at his ears and seemed to jar the very floor of the room. A door slammed; then Nason was fighting his way to his feet.

His eyes would not focus properly as he straightened up. His head was splitting and spinning dizzily, his stomach quivering with nausea. Yet his right hand went to his holster, and

he lurched drunkenly in the direction of the door, stumbled over the plate case and fell heavily.

This time the shock of the fall helped clear his brain. When he got to his feet again, his thoughts were once more logical and lucid, so that a grim bitterness gripped him.

His sweeping glance checked an instant on the form on the bed as he flung open the door. Steig's motionless position was unchanged. But in the center of the forehead was a red-rimmed hole that had not been there before.

Nason saw Carrigan as he leaped into the hall, saw him jack-knifed on the floor, his back against the near wall, his felt hat caught on one humped knee. Opposite, a door to a sun porch was open, and Nason dashed through it, his stride unchecked.

His eyes, unaccustomed to the darkness, betrayed him for a moment and he brought up sharply against the railing. At the same instant an automobile engine roared to life far down across the gently sloping lawn, roared to life and accelerated to a pulsing, rhythmic beat.

For seconds Nason stood there, his thighs pressed tightly against the iron railing. The chilled breeze, slanting in from the East, steadied him, left his body as cold as his thoughts. Overhead a drab, sullen night sky frowned down on him as he holstered his gun and turned wearily away.

Three white-faced and excited nurses were helping Carrigan to his feet. Nason grabbed the fellow's arm and jerked him through the doorway into Steig's room. The nurses pressed in behind him but he turned angrily, rapped: "Get out!"

There was a jumbled protest and he steadied his voice.

"The house doctor—get him here! Quick!"

He shut the door and leaned back against it. Carrigan was rubbing his head and staring wide-eyed at Steig; and he kept saying: "Oh!" over and over.

Nason bent down and picked up the camera. As he did so he saw the yellow card the pimply-faced youth had dropped. It was a *Courier* card, all right. But the picture on it was of a round-faced fellow with glasses; the name was Thomas Walcott.

"It's my fault," Carrigan said hoarsely. "I fell for it. There was two of 'em. One had a camera and a big case. They acted all right until after I called you. Then the skinny guy opened the door, and the other mug sorta pulled me to one side. He did it gentle-like—until I reached for the guy at the door. Then I guess he cracked down on me. I don't remember."

Carrigan shook his head sadly and his thin face was lined with worry. "They'll break me for this."

"Nuts!" rapped Nason through stiff lips.

"They'll break me," chanted Carrigan.

"If they break you, they break me," raged Nason. "They were smart, that's all. They had the camera and case to front for them; they had a police card. They got you to call me—to get me off guard. Then the skinny guy came in with the sales talk to build me up for the fall. And the other guy took care of you."

Nason spat out a bitter curse, looked down at the police card. "I'll want to have a talk with Tommy Walcott and—" He broke off as a sudden flash of inspiration came to him.

Stepping over to Steig's coat, he took out the watch, opened the back and removed the picture. Carrigan was still staring at the hole in the man's forehead, but Nason said:

"She might be a lead—this dame. If I can find her. And if those hoods got Walcott's camera, maybe he can help. It's about all we got."

CHAPTER III
Crime Calls Late

LIEUTENANT FITZPATRICK'S mouth was shut so tightly he appeared to be without lips. His voice was thin, cutting.

"We either find those two torpedoes, or the force takes it on the chin. When the papers get through, the public'll think every damn one of us is a lousy crook."

"And if we do find them"—Captain Bacorn, a thick-set veteran with walrus mustache and a heavy red nose, pushed back in his chair behind his desk, his small deep-set eyes alternating between the raging Fitzpatrick and the grim, set face of Nason—"and they talk, and the story is what you think it is, Fitz, it'll be swell, huh? About Donigan."

"It doesn't have to be Fitzpatrick's way," Nason argued.

"He had the diamonds on him—tucked in his shirt pocket," Bacorn said levelly.

"They could've been planted."

"But why? And how about the gun—still in the holster? Hell"—Bacorn spread his hands—"I don't want to believe it, but I know how it'll look."

Fitzpatrick glared at a round-faced, bespectacled youth who stood beside the closed door of the office. "And you, Walcott, what a spot you put us in," he said to the photographer.

"What a spot I put myself in." Walcott blinked his blue eyes and pushed back a battered felt hat that looked ten years old, a perfect companion piece to his baggy suit. "But what the hell."

He rubbed a pudgy hand over his freckled face.

"I was having a drink in the Greek's about 12:30 on my way back to the office. I noticed these two guys—they were only a couple tables away. One of 'em went out for a minute, and when he came back they went into a huddle.

"They came over and began to kid me, asked me to take their pictures. They acted sorta boiled. One of 'em bought a drink. I said I had to be going, and they went out with me, still acting half-shot, and curious. I remember we passed an alley on the way back to the Avenue. Then socko. I wake up flat on my back."

Walcott grinned ruefully, took off his hat and touched a finger to a swelling over one ear. "That's their trademark."

Carrigan said: "It's my fault; I should—"

"Your fault, hell!" lipped Fitzpatrick. "If it's anybody's fault—" he broke off and glanced at Nason, his eyes sardonic slits. "*You're* the one that let that hood in the room. The sorta personality that makes news, huh? Well, it'll take more than personality this time."

Nason flushed as anger streaked through his brain. He knew what the lieutenant referred to, but before he could dwell on the subject Bacorn said:

"This isn't getting us anywhere. What do you want to do, Fitz?"

"Go down to the Greek's and see if I can get a line on those two hoods," grated Fitzpatrick. "There were no prints on the safe or on the torch that was left behind. We're tryin' to trace it, but it'll be a miracle if we get anywhere with that angle."

He nodded to Carrigan. "Come on."

WHEN the door closed Bacorn again cleared his throat and looked up at Nason through bushy brows without lifting his head.

"Fitz lives and thinks and breathes police work," Bacorn said thoughtfully. "He's all shot over how it's gonna look—about Donigan." He hesitated a moment, adding absently: "The sort of personality that makes news."

Bacorn said something else, but Nason did not catch it, because his brain vortexed around that phrase.

It all went back to the fact that Nason had always played ball with newspapermen. On more than one occasion he had received valuable tips, and he played this source of information just as he played any other—for information—not publicity. He knew that the more contacts a detective has, the more tips he gets. And that more cases are solved on tips than in any other way.

On two occasions, he had been lucky enough to help solve cases that, for the very nature of the crime, had been heavily publicized, even before he was assigned to them. And it was in writing up one of these, that some reporter in describing his work had said: "He has the sort of personality that makes news."

That phrase cost Nason a lot of good-natured razzing. He continued to play ball with the press; the press played ball with him. They liked him. And now this reputation had boomeranged. A pseudo-photographer had tricked him and murdered the State's witness. He was conscious that Bacorn was talking.

"There's a lot of truth in what Fitzpatrick said."

"What?" grunted Nason.

"That you'd need more personality this time."

Bacorn's voice was sharp, but not unkind. "I know you played the publicity angle for the tips it would get you. But you've got a reputation—and it's gonna look different tomorrow in black and white."

Bacorn scowled until his brows drew together. "We find a cop with a pocket full of diamonds, his gun in his holster and a bullet in his back from the man who was guarding the store. Then we let some hoods come in and knock off this witness under police guard. The papers'll ride the D.A. and the Commissioner will ride the Super and me and—well—" Bacorn slid his palms across the desk top. "If you figure on any future in this business, you'd better get started. Because you'll be walking a beat if you don't show something."

Nason moved to the door. "Okay," he said grimly. "You've all got Donigan figured a lousy crook. And if somebody doesn't show something it looks like that's the way it's going down in the books."

In the downstairs hall, Walcott, who had tagged

along behind Nason, struggling with his camera and plate case, said:

"Where you goin'?"

Nason stopped suddenly, his mind fastening on the one clue that he alone had. He took out the little photograph of Steig and the girl on the beach.

"Know her?"

Walcott set down the plate case, took the photograph, finally said: "Sure. Rita Jordan. Works down at the *Cafe Royale*—hostess."

"The value of publicity," snorted Nason starting off again.

"But—" sputtered Walcott, "what you gonna do?"

"Try and hang on to my job."

"You'n me." Walcott swung up the plate case.

"You," growled Nason. "You've caused enough trouble. G'wan back to your rag and—"

"Go back for what? Unless you get lucky and I get some pictures I've no more job than a rabbit. I stick with you."

THE hands of the huge electric clock that glared down on Boylston Street, pointed to 1:25. Nason, slouched back on the seat, stared morosely out of the taxi window at the deserted sidewalks and hollow-eyed window fronts; and the reflection of corner streetlights swept a face that was somber and knotted at the corners of his jaws. He had not spoken a word since they had talked with the manager of the *Cafe Royale* and discovered Rita Jordan's address.

Walcott squirmed on the seat and peered through the semi-darkness at Nason.

"Now we got her address, what're you gonna prove?"

Nason told Walcott where he got the picture, added: "She must've known Steig pretty well. Maybe she knows things about him. What the hell." The voice was brusk. "I'm grabbin' at straws."

Nason let the few facts he had on the case parade before his mind's-eye in single file. There was no use thinking much about the robbery or the diamonds in Donigan's pocket now. His only chance was to find the two hoods. Simple as hell. Just find them and there would be some sort of an answer.

The best lead was through the Greek's—where the gunmen had picked up Walcott. But if there was anything there, Fitzpatrick would find it. He might have a nasty tongue, but he was a damn good cop.

So that left Rita Jordan. Aside from her there was just one thing—one vague question in the back of Nason's brain. He did not know what the question was. But it was there, some place.

The cab slowed down in a quiet, darkened street, lined with three and four-story red brick houses which had been remodeled into cheap apartments. In another moment the driver said: "This is it."

Nason and Walcott got out, and Nason told the driver to wait.

THE house was of three stories, sandwiched in between two slightly taller buildings, all alike architecturally. They climbed narrow stone steps, moved into a darkened vestibule and the wind whipped in behind them, tugging at their coattails. A faint smell of fried food and dusty corners hung in the air as Nason struck a match and studied the row of mail boxes on the wall to learn that Rita Jordan had apartment 3-B.

Nason had to knock three times on the door on the right side of the third floor hall before a thick, contralto voice said: "Who is it?"

Nason nudged Walcott, who blurted: "Tommy Walcott."

A key scratched in the lock. The door opened a two-inch crack and a slab of light slid out and divided Walcott's face. The voice said: "This is a swell time to come calling."

Walcott pushed gently on the door. "I want to talk to you a minute."

Nason studied the girl. With the light behind her, he could not see much of her face. But he saw that she was tall, dark-haired; that she wore filmy pajamas and some sort of a silk robe.

"Who's your friend?" she asked.

"He's from the office," lied Walcott. Then, his voice growing petulant. "All right. Drag up a chair and we'll talk in the hall."

The girl laughed abruptly.

"You've got plenty of nerve to—"

"You gotta have nerve or they shove you around."

"All right." The girl stood back from the door. "But don't think you're going to stay long. I need my sleep."

Nason followed Walcott into the room. The girl turned on a top-heavy lamp. He saw then that the silk wrapper she wore was red, and spotted with

stains. She had apparently gone to bed with her makeup on. It gave a feverish tinge to her skin. At that, she was attractive. She had a nice build and she looked as if she could add up to ten.

Nason dropped on the davenport and Rita Jordan said: "Well, now that you woke me up."

"You a friend of Sam Steig's?" Nason asked easily.

"Maybe." The girl's manner was at once skeptical and on the defensive.

"Know him pretty well?"

Rita Jordan glanced at Walcott. "What is this?" she asked irritably.

Nason took out his shield, flashed it in his palm.

The girl said: "Oh," and her eyes went as round as her mouth.

Nason said: "Who did Steig pal around with?"

"Why do you want to know?" The girl's eyes narrowed again. "What's he done?" Her voice was anxious now, but she turned again to Walcott and tried to make it matter-of-fact. "A fine pal you turned out to be."

Nason said: "Who'd he run with? He must have some friends."

"Certainly he has friends." The girl stopped, glared at Nason, then turned to the door and grabbed at the knob. "Get out. I don't have to talk to you."

Nason stood up. Walking slowly up to the girl, he deliberately took her wrist and pulled her hand from the knob. She jerked back.

"You can't get away with this. I've got friends to take care of me."

Nason studied her a moment, then moved to the center of the room. He took the little photograph out of his pocket, held it up for the girl to see.

Instantly her face paled and there was a breathless quality to her words.

"Where'd you get that?"

"You were pretty good friends, weren't you?"

"Where did you get it?" This in a low frightened tone.

"Out of his watch."

"But—"

"Down in the City Hospital." Nason made his voice deliberately hard and cutting. "He was shot in Alpert's. They took him to the hospital. A couple hoods broke in and gunned him out. I was wondering if you knew any of his *friends*."

"You lie!" Rita Jordan whispered the words, and her face paled so that the old makeup stood out like fever blotches.

Nason's voice was low and even as he waited for the reaction. "He oughta be in the morgue by now."

HE knew, as he spoke, that he had come to the right place. The girl was in love with Steig. She was hard, matter-of-fact, not easy to bluff. But the veneer was scraped clean now. And what he saw was a woman afraid; frightened nearly to hysteria.

Her hand came to her breast, clutched the fabric of her robe. Then she screamed.

Nason started for her. He heard Walcott's muffled curse. He took just one step when the door opened, slapped against the girl's back and knocked her aside.

In the half-light of the background, he saw two men. Or rather, he knew they were there. His eyes were fixed on the snouty muzzle of the automatic, held waist high. For a second he watched it move towards him. Then he brought his eyes up.

The pimply-faced youth, his little mustache curved like his lips in a leering smile, stared back at him. Behind him, closing and locking the door, was a bull-necked fellow with thick black hair and a nose that was flattened and twisted.

At no time in those two or three seconds did Nason have a chance to go for his gun—and he was experienced enough to know when to draw, and when not to. So he smiled purposely and made his voice bored, indulgent.

"I've been looking for you."

"Imagine that." The pimply-faced youth advanced a step, called over his shoulder to his companion. "Get his gun, Hymie!"

Hymie shuffled forward, a squat, long-armed figure. Circling behind Nason, he removed the service revolver.

The pimply-faced youth's glance slid sideways to Walcott, and then to Rita Jordan, who stood like a statue in chalk, one arm crossed tightly to her breast. He grinned at Walcott.

"We didn't get a chance to thank you for the camera, punk. Get over there with your copper friend."

Walcott blinked, seemed unable to fully grasp what had happened. He moved slowly, protestingly, and the pimply-faced youth reached out and slapped him with the barrel of the automatic. Walcott cursed and spun about. This

time the barrel of the gun crashed down on his head with a sickening thud. His hat flew off and he crumpled and went down on his face, joint by joint.

Nason had moved with the blow. But Hymie was still behind him. The gun jammed against his spine and he stiffened there with the sweat breaking out on his forehead.

Hymie grunted in satisfaction. "Now what, Leo?"

The thin youth glanced at Rita Jordan, reached out and took her by the arm. "Get some clothes on, sweetheart, we're goin' places."

Color, oozing slowly back into the girl's face, kept pace with her composure. She seemed to make a desperate effort to mask her feelings, her voice.

"Sure."

She started for the doorway to an inner hall, but Leo said: "Wait a minute."

She stopped.

Leo grunted, nodded at his companion. "I'll watch the dick, Hymie. Go with her."

"I'll go alone," the girl snapped.

"You'll go with Hymie," Leo said, grinning derisively. "And if there's any windows you can get out of in that room of yours, he's gonna stay with you. You can dress in your closet if you're so modest."

The girl's eyes filled with scorn and loathing, and Nason saw this and felt a certain grudging respect for her.

Leo said: "We should let you give us the slip, huh?" He chuckled. "Get started. We ain't got forever you know."

Hymie grinned and shuffled off down the hall after the girl.

CHAPTER IV
The Hospital Clue

RITA JORDAN was dressed in a tight-fitting blue dress when she came back into the living room with Hymie five minutes later.

Leo nodded in approval. "Now watch 'em both, Hymie. I think I'd better make a call."

He picked up the telephone receiver, dialed a number. A moment later he said: "Hello—Leo. Yeah. Yeah, we got her. But get this: that dick and the photographer were here ahead of us. They were putting the bee on her when we got here. I don't know. No. But she screamed about something just as we came in."

Leo fell silent for a few seconds, nodding his head slightly as he listened. "Okay," he said finally. "Sure. How much time do you want? Fifteen minutes. Okay." He hung up.

There was a peculiar smile on his lips now; a peculiar, pitiless look in his little eyes as. he faced Nason, and the detective sensed the answer.

Fifteen minutes. For somebody to fix plans—or frame an alibi probably. He knew too much now. And the hoods could not take chances on how much Rita Jordan had talked. And that went for Walcott, too. The thought sent a quick chill through his veins. He glanced down at the youth. Blood stained the brown hair. He had not moved an inch since he fell. Nason looked up again, and smiled.

"Whose move is it?"

"Not yours, copper." Leo's merciless expression was unchanged. He turned to Hymie. "Take her along. I gotta wait about fifteen minutes."

Rita Jordan gave Nason a frightened, half-appealing look as she went through the door with Hymie's hairy hand on her arm. The door closed and Nason looked back at Leo.

"It's pretty tough," he said slowly, "knocking off a cop and a reporter."

"So they tell me," said Leo insolently. "But they don't put any more volts in the chair for that than for anything else. I shoulda let you have it there in the hospital."

Nason sat erect in the straight-backed chair for several minutes before he spoke. He knew that in some way Donigan had been framed. Just why, he did not know, and this bothered him. His bitterness was like a cancerous growth in his brain.

A half-hour before he had set out from headquarters with his only hope of solution the finding of the two gunmen. And he had found them; or they had found him. And now he was worse off than before.

It was not him alone now. Walcott would have to pay the penalty along with him. And then Rita Jordan. Nason felt that the girl, too, was marked for death.

He cocked one eyebrow at Leo, who stood over by the windows, watching the street below with occasional quick side glances. "So you framed Donigan, hunh?"

Leo grinned and remained silent.

Nason shrugged and hooked his thumbs in his vest pockets. "What I can't figure is how you knew Steig was still alive." He was shooting in the dark

now, but he tried to make his voice idly curious.

"You must've hung around that alley and followed the ambulance to the hospital; or maybe called up—"

Nason stiffened there on the chair as his mind trapped the idea. That question that had lain dormant for so long at the back of his head. He did not have the answer yet. But he felt sure he knew what it would be. And if he was right—

"Sure," said Leo, "what about it?"

Nason stood up and stretched nonchalantly. The thoughts which had vortexed in his brain for so long began to fall into an orderly sequence. Much of his idea was still hunch, still a matter of conjecture. Only—unless he had a chance to follow through, Donigan would be branded a crook forever.

LEO glanced at his strap watch uneasily, shifted his automatic slightly. Nason took a step forward, towards the center of the room and put his fists on his hips.

Leo's brows lifted. "You wouldn't want to start something, would you?"

"Me?" Nason jabbed a thumb at his chest and looked surprised. "Don't be foolish."

"Then go back and sit down."

Nason grinned with that tight, weird smile at his lips and remained motionless. Leo's pimply face flushed and he moved forward with a threatening set to his shoulders. He started to step over Walcott's body, seemed to think better of it. He detoured and walked around in front of the photographer.

Then it happened.

Leo had nearly passed out of Walcott's reach when that hand shot up. It was the first movement Walcott had made since he fell, and he was lying on his face, his eyes apparently closed, so that the element of surprise was all in his favor. He could not hold Leo, but this hand caught one ankle long enough to trip him off balance.

Leo cursed shrilly and went to one knee. Before he could swing the automatic around, Nason hit him; hit him with a lunging dive that brought his shoulder into the gunman's neck.

They went down together, arms and legs thrashing. The automatic flew from Leo's grasp, smacked against the wall and bounced back towards him. Nason, rolling clear, concentrated on that gun. His forward momentum, as he bowled Leo over, carried him on a few feet, and he snatched up the automatic as he twisted to his knees.

Walcott was struggling to his feet. Leo, swinging a wild right as Nason turned to face him, made one more last, desperate lunge. Then the detective whipped the gun down on the unprotected head.

Leo, on one knee, started to sag and his breath whistled through his teeth. Nason cocked his arms once more. The gun came down in a short, vicious arc. There was a quick, crunching sound. Leo went over on his back, his arm outflung. One leg drew up, straightened. The other twitched once. He did not move again. He did not look as if he would ever move.

Nason watched the gunman for a moment, then turned to Walcott. The photographer had a handkerchief in his hand now, was dabbing at the bloody spot on his head. He said: "You hit that guy like you was mad," thickly.

Nason grunted. "Nice work. How long you been around?"

"When Hymie took the girl out, I guess. I didn't figure we had much chance against that gun unless—"

"You newspaper guys," Nason said grimly, "don't do so bad."

He slipped the automatic in his coat pocket, crossed quickly to the telephone, snapped up the receiver and dialed the operator.

"City Hospital. Sure. I know they got a number. Get it. Police business."

After a moment he got his number. Then it took him some minutes before he could reach the party he wanted. When he did, he spoke crisply, a bit profanely for a few seconds, hung up.

He picked up his hat and started for the door, and Walcott said: "What're you gonna do with this guy?"

"Leave him," lipped Nason. "He won't be goin' places alone. We'll send for him."

THE taxi driver was asleep when they got downstairs. He started to protest Nason's rude method of wakening him, but something in the detective's manner stopped him.

Nason gave an address off Commonwealth Avenue and as soon as the cab started, Walcott said:

"What's out there?" His voice got eager,

excited. "I can tell you've got something by the look on your pan. Is that where Hymie and the girl went?" Then, without waiting for an answer: "How do you know?"

"I don't"

"You're a hell of a dick."

"You heard me call the hospital."

"What about it?"

"How did those two torpedoes know where Steig was?"

"They coulda followed the ambulance. I heard you say that yourself, when I was playin' 'possum."

"Yeah. And boy was I dumb to think that." Nason's voice got sarcastic, mocking. "They could've followed the ambulance. Then they could've gone to the Greek's, decided to go back and rub him out, got the idea of getting your camera to front for 'em."

"Sure," grunted Walcott. "Why not?"

"Then how did they know which room to go to? How'd they know just what room Steig had?"

"Hell, they could've asked."

"Yeh," rapped Nason. "They could've asked. *Only they didn't!*"

"They didn't?" echoed Walcott hollowly. "Then—"

"I got the reception room girl on the telephone. She remembers those guys coming in. But they breezed right past her. She's sure of it."

"Hell!" wheezed Walcott, jerking erect on the seat. "Then somebody tipped 'em off."

"Sure." Nason cursed softly. "Carrigan, Alpert, Fitzpatrick and me in the room with Steig."

"It coulda been somebody in the hospital."

"It could, but it wasn't. I had the girl check with the operator. Nobody called in about Steig until after the shooting."

"*Alpert!*" Walcott said hoarsely.

Nason said: "He must've called those two hoods at the Greek's just after he left the hospital. You happened to be there when the call came. And somebody—Leo, probably—flashed the idea of using your camera and card."

The taxi slowed down and Nason rapped on the glass partition and said: "Pull on up to the corner."

THE two men walked back to the marquee of a modern brick apartment house in the middle of the block. There was no name on the wide, chromium-trimmed doors, but in the rubber mat which crossed the sidewalk were white letters which spelled: *The Ellington*.

At that hour there was no doorman, and Nason crossed the spacious entryway to the sunken lobby. A sleepy-eyed clerk blinked at them from his desk on the left wall, but Nason paid him no attention, continuing on to the elevators with Walcott, still lugging his camera and plate case, at his heels.

The elevator boy furnished the information that Alpert had apartment 4-F, and they went up. It was the last apartment on the left side of a thickly-carpeted hall, and as Nason stopped in front of the pastel-gray door, he sobered slightly as he analyzed his hunch.

In his own mind he was certain that Alpert had been connected with Steig's death. But even so, there was no proof; and the only chance was to bluff his way through—or find Alpert and Hymie and Rita Jordan. He turned to Walcott, spoke in quick, low tones.

"If Alpert is here alone, it may be a bust. I may have to get rough, and it'll be a mess if I don't produce."

"Yeah," whispered Walcott. "But suppose Hymie is in there?"

"That'll be swell."

"But the heat might go on. You oughta have some help. Why don't you call headquarters and—"

"And get 'em down here on a false alarm?" grunted Nason. "I'm in bad enough as it is."

He hesitated, glanced up and down the hall. There was a window at the rear end, and he stepped to it, opened it and looked out. Faintly outlined against the rear of the building was a network of fire escape, a branch of which apparently scaled the side of Alpert's living room—some room, at least, where the light was on.

He made his plan then, because he knew the truth of what Walcott had said. He might need help. He pulled the youth close.

"I'll give you a couple of minutes to get down in the alley here. Watch this window. If I move the shade, beat it for a telephone and get Fitz down here—I'll need him. If you don't see anything you'll know I've drawn a blank."

"And then what?"

"Then"—a wry grin twisted Nason's somber face—"we'll leave town together."

He gave Walcott a push, watched him until the elevator door closed behind his back. He waited a full two minutes longer; then he pressed the

mother-of-pearl button at the side of the door, and slid his right hand into his pocket, fitted it around the cool metal of Leo's automatic.

A moment later he heard the soft tread of footsteps, realized that if Alpert asked who he was, and he gave his name, it might ruin his scheme. A sudden burst of inspiration gave him the name of Alpert's lawyer.

A voice said: "Who is it?"

Nason spoke quickly, from way down in his throat. "Sol Hirschbaum."

The knob turned and Nason waited until the door started to open. He moved with it, slapping his shoulder against the panel. The door gave a foot or so, caught against some object; Nason's weight crashed into this object, knocked it aside as he barged forward.

Alpert was slammed against the wall of a tiny entryway. Beyond him, at the far side of an expensively-furnished and softly lighted living room, sat Rita Jordan. The bull-necked Hymie had spun towards the door, was clawing at his shoulder-holster.

Nason said: "Take it out, Hymie, and see what it gets you."

Hymie hesitated with his hand at his lapel, met Nason's hostile gaze for an instant, dropped the hand. Nason poked the white-faced and astounded Alpert with his gun, said: "Get in there," as he closed and locked the door.

Alpert backed into the living room, his hands half-raised, although nothing had been said about them. A frightened expression twisted his fatty face now, and his thick-lipped mouth hung open. He kept backing until he felt the divan against the calves of his legs; then he dropped down on it beside Rita Jordan.

Nason gave the girl a quick, searching glance. She sat stiffly erect on the edge of the divan, her hands tightly twisted together in her lap. Her eyes were wide and round, and there was fear in their depths.

Nason moved slowly across the room to the windows. He saw that the first one, by the fire escape, was open, that a faint draft was sucking the drawn shade outward. Reaching down, he raised the shade halfway, glanced out; then he turned to face Hymie, and Moe Alpert.

CHAPTER V
DRINK TO THE DEVIL

HYMIE continued to stand in the middle of the room, his thick homely face sullen and malignant, until Nason said: "Just stand right there," and went around behind him and took his gun. Slipping it into a pocket of his coat, he moved away, added, "Now sit down with your pal—so I can watch the both of you."

For a few seconds, while Nason studied Alpert and Hymie, he considered the time element. It would take Walcott two or three minutes to find a telephone at this hour; it would take another eight or ten minutes before Fitzpatrick could get here. Say twelve minutes altogether. He decided to use the time to try and plug the gaps in his half-completed theory of what had happened.

"You've been pretty lucky tonight," he said finally, looking at Rita Jordan.

"I know it." The girl's voice was jerky, uncertain. "I—I think they were going to kill me."

"So," went on Nason, "if I were you, I'd come clean. I want to know where you fit. You and Steig—"

"We were going to be married," the girl said, her voice flat and hopeless. "Only I wasn't satisfied. I knew he worked for Alpert, but he always had a lot of money—and he would not tell me where he got it. I was afraid that after we were married, maybe something would happen. I didn't know what—only I was afraid."

The girl hesitated a moment, continued in the same low tone.

"But he promised me we could go away. To Philadelphia—I've got a brother there. Sam said he'd tell Alpert he was going to leave next week and—"

"Oh—" Nason's voice held a thin, metallic ring, and a mirthless smile tugged at his lips. "Maybe I get it now." He looked at Alpert. "I guess you are the reason those other three jewel breaks were so neat.

"You could be your own fence, huh? And Steig was in on it with you—your guard. But you were afraid to let him go. So you figured a way to rub him out. You told him you were going to rob your own store to make it look like you were just another victim. But your real reason was to put him out of the way."

"You're nuts." Alpert licked his lips. "I don't

know what you're talking about."

"You know, all right," Nason said ominously. "And I know you put the finger on Steig in the hospital." He went on to explain how he had checked up with the clerk at the hospital. "And if these two hoods had asked what room Steig had, you'd been clean on this. But when you called 'em at the Greek's, you gave 'em the room number."

NASON moved slowly forward, his dark eyes hard and glaring. "One of your punks planted those stones on Donigan."

"No," wheezed Alpert. "You got me wrong." His eyes were shifty now, his forehead moist with sweat. "Why should anybody do that?"

"I can guess that part, too—now," Nason answered. "You imported Hymie and Leo—you don't need to worry about him anymore—and you told Steig they'd do the job and leave him tied in a chair. Maybe slug him a bit to make it look better. Only you knew they were going *to rub Steig out when they finished*.

"Donigan surprised the break. The trouble was"—Nason's voice thinned out—"he thought Steig would be on his side. He turned his back and Steig, the rat, shot him. It was either that or go to jail when your punks talked. And Steig didn't know then that he was on the spot.

"Then," Nason's lips pulled back, "I've got an idea somebody called you and told you what had happened. It would look funny, a cop who was on to that kind of a job being shot in the back. The first thing we'd think of was that somebody he'd trusted shot him—which had to be Steig.

"So you planted the stones and put Donigan's gun back in his holster to make it look as if Donigan was the crook and Steig was honest—when we found him dead; to make us think just what Fitzpatrick did think. So that—"

A sudden gasp from Rita Jordan that was like a half-stifled scream, tensed Nason's muscles. Then a rough voice said:

"All right. Drop it!"

For a fraction of a second Nason hesitated. The voice came from behind—there was a doorway here, he remembered, which led to the apartment's other rooms. He glanced over his shoulder. The man in the doorway who held the heavy automatic was thin, swart, black-eyed. A stranger. He was smiling now and perfect white teeth flashed in the overhead light.

Nason dropped the gun. It hit the side of his shoe as it fell, and he forced a smile, spoke to Alpert. "So I was wrong about one part? You imported three hoods instead of two."

Moe Alpert recovered his composure in a few seconds. A sly smile filmed his puffy face and he stood up, nodding in approval.

"That was fine, Lascell. And a break—you bein' in the kitchen after a drink." He wiped sweat from his forehead. "You shoulda come sooner. I thought you died or something."

He started towards the inner doorway. "I think I'll get that drink. I need something."

Nason, standing a few feet in front of the divan with Lascell at his side and Hymie facing him, watched Alpert leave the room and return a few seconds later with a tray. There were four glasses, a bottle of rye, some cracked ice and a siphon of soda. Alpert put the tray on a little table at one end of the divan, and began to pour whisky.

Looking questioningly at Nason as he siphoned soda, he said: "Have one?"

Hymie growled an oath, said, "To hell with all this crap. When do we lay this guy away?"

"Right now," Alpert drained his glass and wiped his lips with the back of his hand. "Only you gotta do it without much noise."

Lascell said: "Get a towel, Hymie."

Nason felt the sweat come out on his lip, and spring from the roots of his hair. He tried to keep his voice level.

"So I had it figured after all."

"You were close enough," Alpert said, and his voice got harsh and resentful.

"We had a good set-up for that punk, Steig. He came in handy for a while. Only the doll here"—he nodded to Rita Jordan—"talked him soft. He was going to quit—and he started to get tough about his share. And I hadn't even got rid of the stuff on the last break."

Continuing to fight for time, Nason said, hurriedly: "You won't get away with it."

"Sure we will," Alpert said without the faintest trace of emotion. "We'll dump you. Then we'll put out the dame's lights. The boys'll leave town—"

"There's still Leo," Nason lied. "We got him down at headquarters."

"If you have," Lascell leered, "he won't talk. With you gone there's no witness against him."

"There's Walcott."

"We'll take care of him, too," said Alpert. "If

we have to."

Lascell finished wrapping the towel around the muzzle of his gun. Nason glanced quickly about. Lascell was three feet to one side, next to Alpert. Hymie stood over by the white-faced and terrified girl on the divan.

Nason felt the pressure of Hymie's gun in the pocket of his coat. Whether it was overconfidence, or just plain oversight on Alpert's part, that gun had not been taken from him. One thing was certain. He had nothing to lose.

He saw Lascell's gun come up, saw Alpert stand aside. He looked over at the girl who sat rigidly erect, her mouth half-open. Then he said, keeping his voice as level as he could:

"I guess I'd better get my drink while I can."

"Never mind!" Lascell ordered.

Nason did not dare look at the gunman. Concentrating on his job he picked up a glass, quickly poured whiskey and began to squirt soda from the siphon.

"If this is going to be my last drink—"

He glanced up, grinned at Lascell. Then, moving as he talked, he twisted his wrist sharply and shot the driving stream of soda into Lascell's face. The gunman cursed as the charged water slapped against the bridge of his nose and filled his eyes. Momentarily blinded, he ducked, turned his head.

Pivoting and still holding to the handle of the bottle, Nason hurled it at Hymie and jerked at the gun in his pocket. He saw the heavy bottle smash into Hymie's forehead, heard the crash as it shattered, saw the fellow start to sag. Then his gun was out.

LASCELL lost another second trying to free his automatic from the towel. In the final instant that the gun flashed upward, Nason squeezed the trigger. Recoil was a welcome slap at his wrist. The gun roared and Lascell's body jerked under the impact of the slug, and he fired once, wildly, before he dropped the gun.

Nason kept turning, but before he could face Alpert he saw the compact automatic swing up in the man's fat hand.

He sensed that he was going to be hit. He felt his nerves instinctively set themselves for the shock, and he tried to twist to one side as he fired. Alpert's gun crashed first. Nason saw the faint flash of orange flame, felt the searing pain at the side of his neck. Then the roar of his heavier gun blotted out the sound of the little automatic.

Surprise flooded Alpert's face. He staggered, tried to bring the gun up again. This time Nason fired deliberately. And at the moment, strangely enough, he found himself thinking of Donigan who had died without a chance from a bullet in his back.

Lascell was already on the floor. Alpert's hand came down. His fingers relaxed and the gun thudded to the carpet. For another second or two he swayed drunkenly on his widespread feet. Then he went down on his knees and fell over on his face.

Nason jerked his gaze from the picture of death. Rita Jordan pressed white-knuckled fists to the side of her cheeks and stared wildly at Hymie who was lying on his face, with glass fragments scattered about him, his hair soaked with blood and water.

Nason lowered his gun. Powder smoke choked the stale air. He blew out his breath and felt a sudden weakness undermine his tension. He stood there motionless with the sweat coming out on his face and the blood seeping down to wet his collar until a sudden noise broke the silence behind him.

Spinning about with his gun up, he was just in time to see Walcott topple in through the window from the fire escape and sprawl to the floor on top of his plate case.

Nason cursed softly, relaxed. Walcott rose, eyes wide and popping behind his glasses. His mouth sagged.

"Boy," he breathed. "How you go. I heard the shots and I—" He pulled out his tripod, and his voice was choked with admiration and eagerness as he added: "With what I'm going to get I'll have a job again."

LIEUTENANT Fitzpatrick stood spread-legged in the center of the room until Nason finished his story. Then he shook his head from side to side and said:

"What an idea! If Steig had been finished in the first place, we'd've been licked."

His eyes narrowed as he hesitated. "At that, if you hadn't thought to check with the hospital girl—" He pursed his lips. "That was smart."

Nason said, "It took me long enough to think of it."

He sat in a chair by the door now, a handkerchief pressed to the side of his neck. "But there had to be some angle, because I knew Donigan. He never was a crook."

Fitzpatrick's keen eyes held a look of respect. "Okay. You were right and I was wrong. I'm damned glad of it."

He glanced at the two plainclothesmen who were inspecting the bodies; at the now conscious and glowering Hymie; at the girl.

"Alpert and Lascell won't give us any more trouble. We'll get Hymie and this punk, Leo—if he's still alive—for the hospital kill. And Donigan"—Fitzpatrick shook his head again—"boy, am I glad he was an honest cop.

"Anyway," he said, "I was right about one thing. You had to show more than personality. It wasn't personality that got you out of this jam."

"Personality, hell!" grunted Walcott, slipping another plate holder into his camera. "I think they must've got him sore. And when he gets sore he gets tough."

"I wasn't sore," Nason said quietly, in the tone of a man who, unaware of his surroundings, was thinking of other things. "Donigan never had a chance. I had one and I took it."

CASEY AND THE BLOND WREN

by GEORGE HARMON COXE

The man behind the gun said: "Drop it lady!"

FLASHGUN CASEY was bored. For the past twenty minutes, while the *Ruthania's* gangplanks were being lowered, he had trailed McCall, the ship-news man, in the hope of getting a worthwhile picture or

There were two kinds of people that got the goat of the number-one photographer on the *Express*—the camera-crazy and the camera-shy. The blond little British wren was the latter—lens-leery though lovely, and she had a reason. A lead reason calibered to fit a blue-steel argument that couldn't be refuted by words alone.

two. Instead, he had found the shipload of passengers singularly nondescript, with not even an actress or chorus girl to give him the opportunity to snap some leg art and break the routine.

And then, as the ship emptied and they were about to leave, he saw the man with the cane step out of a passageway and hesitate a moment, surveying the nearly deserted deck with cold, steady eyes.

In spite of the noticeable limp he stood very straight, his heavy ulster square across the thin shoulders, the lines in his lean face tight and deep. Gray, austere, and no longer young, there was something very British about him even before he spoke.

"Sorry," he said coldly, as McCall stepped up and identified himself. He took a step as if to pass, then he saw Casey lift his camera. With that he turned on his cane and stepped back into the passageway.

"Hmm," breathed McCall. "Touchy."

Casey grinned, no longer bored.

There were, in his life, only two kinds of people who gave him trouble—professionally, that is. One was the publicity crazy lens lice who went everywhere just to get their pictures taken with people of some importance, and who frequently were circumvented only by wasting a flashbulb and forgetting to pull out the plateholder slide. The other class was made up of Morgans and Toscaninis who, for some reason or other, hated photographers and refused to pose.

Because the man with the cane was one of these, Casey was interested. Not that the picture would be printed necessarily, at least until he knew who his quarry was, but Casey liked a challenge. That's why he was number-one camera for the *Express.*

"Come on," he grunted, the grin still splitting his broad solid face as he started down the gangplank. "I'll get him on the pier."

He found a place beside a concrete pillar just inside the customs shed, and while he waited he adjusted his shutter and focus and made sure the flashbulb was screwed in. When McCall nodded he moved a half-step around the column, taking a quick glance toward the gangplank as he did so. Right then he realized that there was someone else aboard the *Ruthania* who was worth a picture.

SHE came down the gangplank a half-dozen steps behind the man with the cane, a slim, blond girl, tall and aristocratic-looking in her tailored tweed suit, one hand on the railing and poise in every movement.

Casey saw this much before the man with the cane stepped from the shelter of the canopied gangplank, limped across the pier and into the shed. When he stopped to orient himself, Casey stepped out in the open and snapped the shutter.

It was practically a full-face shot, and as the bulb exploded light in the shed, Casey noticed that in spite of the crowd milling about the concrete floor there were but three people in the range of his finder—his man, the girl, who was now but a step or two to one side, and a squat, dark fellow with thick-lensed glasses, who leaned idly against another pillar a few feet in the background.

Casey heard the clipped English accent of the man with the cane, his protesting, "Here! I say now—" and then he moved past, ignoring his sputtering victim for a last look at the girl.

Her reaction puzzled him. He had noticed the look of startled surprise as he lowered his camera, and now her smooth young face held an expression that seemed like consternation, or alarm. He was still wondering where she had been hiding and who she was when he came to the customs gate.

Tom Wade greeted him with a grin as he and McCall passed the uniformed official and Casey said: "You going back to the office?"

A curly-headed youth with a round, goodnatured face, Wade had ridden down with Casey and McCall, his pockets bulging with plateholders, to cover an assignment on nearby Fish Pier, and

had agreed to wait for them if he finished first.

"Sure," he said. "Aren't you?"

"I got a call from Jake Cohen," Casey explained. "He says he's got a good buy in a second-hand six-inch lens. It's almost five now and if I don't step on it he'll be closed." He shoved his exposed plateholders at Wade. "Take 'em back for me, will you?"

HEN Casey came into the studio anteroom on the third floor of the *Express* Building, Egan was holding up a *Racing Form* in front of his face, but he wasn't picking a horse, he was looking covertly over the top of the paper and eyeing the girl with frank admiration. She sat on a rickety chair near the door, her knees crossed and back straight. Her head came round as Casey stopped in the doorway. Her glance met his and held it.

Egan rattled the *Racing Form* and stood up. "She"—he nodded to indicate the girl and winked—"she's been waiting for you, Flash."

"It's about that picture."

She was on her feet now, a certain breathlessness in her manner, and Casey knew then that the impressions he had formed so quickly down at the customs shed were correct, but not complete. Her slenderness was softly curving in spite of the tailored suit. She *was* tall, and young, not more than twenty-two or -three. But until now he had not known that her eyes were clear gray—nor about the satin smoothness of her skin nor the texture of her straw-colored hair. She was not really pretty, her face was too thin and too severe, but Casey had the photographer's eye for line and he knew the bone structure was good and that she would grow beautiful with the years.

"The one you took at the customs shed," she added quickly when he did not speak.

Casey stalled, amusement in the back of his eyes and his face blank. "Did I take a picture of you?" he asked doubtfully. "I don't seem to remember—"

"It wasn't of me exactly. It was a man with a cane, really, but I know I was in it and—well, I wondered—" She broke off and began again, with the charm turned on. "Could I have that picture, please?"

"Why?" he asked goodnaturedly, discounting the charm because he had faced such requests so often.

That stopped her for a second or two. Then she was speaking in a low, modulated voice that was soft with an accent that could have come only from London —or the stage.

"I'm not supposed to be here," she said. "That is—" She broke off again and lines moved in her face and he saw that she was smiling. He didn't believe the smile. It came only after an effort and was a studied, shallow thing that did not go with the eyes.

"As a matter of fact," she went on, "I came over here to be married. I was supposed to leave Southampton today but I found I could get a cabin on the *Ruthania* and took it, and well, I'll have a week or more, you see, before I'm really due here."

The grin that was in the back of Casey's eyes fled to leave them dark and probing and skeptical. "Oh," he said.

"Yes. It's just"—the smile faded and she lowered her glance—"one of those silly ideas one has. I'd like to have my week to myself and be by myself and do as I please. Not that I don't love Paul. It's only that I'd like to have this time as my own, and if the picture was printed in the paper it would be frightfully awkward."

There was a little more of this, all of it leaving Casey strangely unconvinced. He didn't know why. The words were not unreasonable and the eagerness to impress was unmistakable. But the melody was a little off key and presently he looked past her at Egan.

"Wade been in?"

Egan shook his head and Casey leaned

over his desk, picked up the telephone and asked for McCall. "Wade come back with you?" he asked, and when McCall told him Wade had stopped on Washington Street for a beer, Casey added, "Oh, he did, huh?" and replaced the instrument thoughtfully.

Cohen's pawnshop had been closed when he arrived and as a result he had come directly back to the *Express*. Wade, apparently, was taking plenty of time over the beer.

"You'd better leave your name and address," he told the girl.

"Allison." She hesitated, gray eyes doubtful. "Nancy Allison."

"Where can I reach you?"

"At the Clark Hotel."

"All right," Casey said, "I'll let you know." He saw the quick concern in her glance and met it with steady speculation, knowing now that he would not have given her the picture if he'd had it —not until he was satisfied as to the real reason which prompted this routine. Since he had a good excuse, he used it, explaining how he had given his plates to Wade.

"So I haven't got yours," he said, "because Wade hasn't come back."

The gray eyes clouded and Nancy Allison's, "Oh," was keenly disappointed. "Then—"

"I'll let you know," Casey said again, and left it that way, so that the girl had no alternative but to leave.

"Nice," said Egan approvingly when she had gone. "You'll let her know, huh? At her hotel. My-my."

Casey growled absently, stood for a moment with thick brows bent in thought. Then he went upstairs to the city-room, dark eyes narrowed by the puzzles in his brain.

McCall was tapping out a story at his desk. "Wade get back?" he asked, not looking up.

"No." Casey hesitated, continued bluntly. "Did you check up on that guy with the cane? The one that didn't want to be interviewed?"

McCall stopped typing, nodded, picked up a slip of paper from his desk. "Name of Banning," he said. "George Banning. Came in on an English visa. That's about all the purser knew about him."

"Travel alone?"

"Yep. Single stateroom with private bath." McCall glanced up, one brow cocking. "Why? You got something?"

Casey shook his head, his brow furrowed. "Not a thing. Not even my picture—yet."

CASEY found Wade as he came along the narrow alley from the parking space in back of the *Express* Building on his way back from dinner. Night was closing in fast over the city and here in the canyon between the grimy brick walls it was already dark so that Casey did

not see what tripped him but only felt the limp form under his foot as he stumbled to one knee.

He struck a match. The flame flared briefly and the walls withdrew and a yellow glow bathed a round smooth face that was white and still. The hat had rolled aside, disclosing a matted patch in the curly hair behind the ear. A cobblestone was stained with dark red spots. The wind, cold and raw as it drove in from the ocean swirled down and eddied along the alley floor.

The match went out and Casey was suddenly cold with an inner chill that put stiffness into his muscles. He knelt that way for seconds, incredulous, while the dust swirled about his ankles. Then, with a savage grunt, he lifted Tom Wade in his arms and hurried for the lighted sidewalk ahead.

A group of pressmen coming in from supper drew back as he passed through the narrow foyer. They followed him into the classified room, huddling about and muttering as Casey put Wade on the settee by the windows.

"A doctor!" Casey ordered of the single clerk behind the counter, and the clerk had the good sense to reach for the telephone before asking questions.

When they found out that Casey had nothing to tell, the pressmen fell silent, watching him feel for a pulse beat and make a pillow of his coat. Suddenly he rose, and they moved out of his way.

He found Wade's platecase in the alley close to his hat. He brought it inside and opened it. When he saw that all of the plateholders were missing, the muscles in his face got hard and anger made his dark eyes hot and bright.

The doctor was noncommittal, calling for an ambulance after his first quick inspection. "He'll probably be all right," he said finally, "but we'll have to put him under observation until we know."

A burly truck driver had been stationed at the door and only those who had some good reason to be there were in the room. Among them were Blaine, the city editor, and McCall. Blaine, with his lean, unsmiling face and prematurely gray hair and cold gray eyes, Blaine the disciplinarian who accepted sentiment only in a human interest story, who refused excuses and was the best desk man in the city. The moment he spoke, Casey knew that McCall had told him too much.

"Who would want to slug him?" Blaine asked curtly. And when Casey said he didn't know, "Why didn't you bring your own plates in?"

Casey told him, just as curtly and with more feeling.

"He had an assignment of his own, you know," Blaine said. "If he'd come back with McCall—"

"You'd have had your plates, wouldn't you?" Casey finished resentfully.

Blaine glared at him and spoke to the doctor. "See that he has the best," he said, and left the room.

CASEY stood beside the settee, a burly man with a broad rugged face and thick brown hair peppered with gray at the sides and shaggy at the nape. The ruggedness of his face stood out now because the set muscles made grim bunches at the hinge of his jaw. The look in his dark eyes was unpleasant to see, and his voice had a vicious edge.

"What'd they hit him with?" he asked.

The doctor closed his bag. "Something with a hard edge."

Casey looked down at the still figure and then, suddenly, he saw that Wade's eyes were open—vacant, pain-ridden eyes until they focused on Casey. The smile came, weakly but definite.

"You must've had something special, Flash. What was it?"

"I don't know, kid." Casey made his voice hearty, though his throat was thick from the smile. "But we'll damn well find out."

"I tried to give them an argument." Wade's eyes closed again and his voice trailed off. "They played kind of rough, pal."

Casey's hand closed on the arm of the

settee, twisting with white knuckles until the dry wood cracked. "Five foot six and a hundred and thirty pounds," he muttered, speaking to no one. "They didn't have to slug him."

He rode in the ambulance with Wade, hoping that there would be another conscious spell in which he could learn something about the "they" who had done this. When, after the youth had been put to bed, he found there was nothing he could do, he went back to the office. There he found waiting for him a chubby individual with a taxi-driver's shield pinned to his cap. He had, he said, heard about Wade.

"And I been thinking about it, Flash," he said. "Maybe I picked up the guys that put the slug on him. I'm parked down by the corner, see? And two parties come out of the alley. Just about the right time, too."

"What did they look like?"

"Well"—the driver rubbed the stubble on his chin—"just ordinary-looking guys, sort of. One was thin and kinda tallish and the other was maybe a couple of inches shorter and heavier—a good-looking guy."

Casey's grunt was derisive. "That's a big help, Hoxie. Just two guys named Joe, huh? Hell, didn't you see anything?"

"I don't know anything then, do I?" Hoxie said defensively. "They want a ride and they climb in."

"Where'd they go?"

"They went—wait a minute. I did notice one thing. The thin guy had a scar across the corner of his mouth."

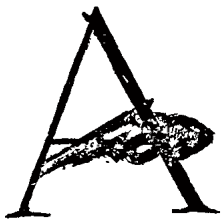
"Where'd they go?" Casey pressed.

"Down to the corner of Stuart. I had to park while one of 'em made a phone call. When he came back he said he had to go to the Bradwyne Hotel, and that the other guy was to go back to Radnor's. So I took him there."

"Radnor's?"

"An antique joint just off Boylston."

"And the Bradwyne," Casey said thoughtfully, dark eyes narrowing, "is right across from the Clark."



A POLICE car was parked a short distance beyond the marquee of the Bradwyne and Casey, bent on having words with the house detective, spotted it as he turned in.

The chauffeur, in plain clothes, said, "Hello, Flash," and answered Casey's question as to why he was waiting here matter-of-factly. "Somebody got shot."

"Who's handling it?"

"Logan."

Casey strode into the lobby, folding a bill in his palm so the *5* on it showed as he came up to the bell captain.

"Twelve-five-o," said the captain cupping his hand.

Casey rode up and turned down the twelfth-floor corridor. There was a man at the far end. He turned out to be a burly plainclothesman and he was leaning against the pastel-gray casing that framed the door of room 1250.

"Hi, Lafferty," greeted Casey.

"What do you want?" said Lafferty, scowling suspiciously.

Casey was already reaching for the doorknob and he nearly broke his wrist when the plainclothesman blocked him. "You can't go in there," he stated flatly.

Casey looked surprised and hurt. "But the lieutenant sent for me."

"Yah—"

"O. K." Casey shrugged. "It's up to you. I'll have to tell him you wouldn't let me in."

It was a good act and Lafferty wavered. "Yeah?" he said doubtfully. "You wouldn't try to kid me, would you, Flashgun?"

Casey remained silent but continued to look hurt, and with a reluctant stare at the big photographer Lafferty turned and opened the door, intent on sticking his neck into the room and asking his question.

The instant the door moved Casey pushed forward. Lafferty strangled on a curse and arched his back, but Casey had a little momentum, and he was just

as big as Lafferty. In the end the plainclothesman had to let go of the doorknob or lose his arm. He let go and the two of them stumbled across the threshold with Lafferty running interference.

Four men stood in the room. A fifth was stretched on the floor, a still slender figure with gray hair and mustache and a thin, lined face. There was a dark stain on his waistcoat and nearby lay a gun—and a cane.

Startled by the entrance the quartet stared at Casey. Warbeck, the house detective, began to grin and so did the plainclothesman and the fingerprint man and photographer. Lieutenant Logan just bent an eye at Lafferty, and stared sourly.

"I shoulda known," choked Lafferty, face purple and breath coming hard. "He said you sent for him. I shoulda—"

"You can't come in here, Flash," Logan said wearily, ignoring Lafferty. "Not till the M. E.'s been here. You know that. Go on, now, shove off."

"If you say so," Casey answered in mock regret, "but I thought you'd want to know some things about *him.*" He nodded at the still figure on the floor.

"And you can tell us?"

"I took a picture of him this afternoon. Name's Banning, isn't it?"

He catalogued the condition of the room—the overturned chair and table, the broken lamp—as he spoke, and without waiting for Logan to voice his surprise, Casey told him what he knew, his voice flat and direct until he began to speak of what had happened to Wade. Then his tone took on an edge, and his eyes got sultry.

"You think there's a hook-up between the two that jumped Wade and this?" Logan asked when the story was finished.

"I thought there might be," Casey said. And, after a pause, "Know anything about him?"

"Not much." Logan rubbed his chin and pushed out his lips. "He was shot twice with that Webly at close range, and his name on the register downstairs is Banning, all right. But—things we found on him say he's Eric Kirkman, and he's got some tie-up with the British navy. It could be phony. We're trying to get in touch with the British consul.

"We may get a line when we find the woman."

"What woman?"

Casey's lids came down and he waited.

"She came up here somewhere around the time that a fellow across the hall heard what sounded like shots. And it just happened that the same elevator boy took her down. She was up here four or five minutes and she was like a ghost—so the boy says—when she rode down. Had to speak to her three times when the car stopped in the lobby before she got out."

"Hmm," Casey said, still waiting with nerves a little tight.

"We've got a pretty good description of her," Logan went on. "Slender, blond, young, brown tweed suit and English accent. If she took a cab we might nail her."

THE door opened at Casey's second knock. She had her hat and coat on and a handbag under her arm. She stiffened and paled when she saw him and for that first second or two her jaw sagged and many things battled it out in the depths of her gray eyes. In the end a mantle of distant politeness settled over her.

"Oh," she said. "You—come in, please. You"—she hovered over him when she closed the door—"you have the picture?"

Casey looked right at her, not speaking until he saw her forces crumble and the color start to ooze from her cheeks.

"No," he said, watching the fear come into her eyes. "I thought maybe you had those plates," he added, and went on in clipped hard sentences to tell about Tom Wade.

She heard him out, the whiteness coming about her jaw. "But that's ridicu-

lous," she said finally. "Why should I have come and asked for the picture if—"

"Because," said Casey, "when you asked you thought I had already delivered the plates to the office and there was no other way of getting the one you wanted. That's why you gave me your right name and address. Afterward, when you learned that Wade had the plate, and had not yet returned, it made things much simpler."

He went on with his theory, guessing, bluffing, filling in gaps. "Wade wasn't very big," he said in the end. "And there were two of them. Are they the ones that shot the Englishman—or was that your job?"

She caught her breath, the recoil of her nerves a visible thing. He waited for her to speak, then tried again.

"You followed him off the boat. You were in that picture with him."

She stood perfectly still, nothing changing in her face, and his dark eyes got morose. Abruptly, with a shrug and a half-audible grunt, he stepped to the telephone and picked it up. "Hello," he said, and then her voice rose up behind him sharp and jerky, and something thudded softly to the floor.

"Put that down!"

Her very tone checked him, and when he glanced over his shoulder he saw the little automatic in her hand. On the floor near her feet was the open handbag.

Casey put down the instrument, his lips forming a tight little smile as he faced her. The gun was steady in her hand, and she was backing toward the door, her handbag forgotten. He stood watching her slow backward progress until, reaching behind her, she found the knob.

"Look," he said, his voice no longer hard, "why don't you tell me about it? You're using a gun to run out, but what will it get you? The minute you shut the door I'll call the desk. They'll grab you before you can get out."

That did it. The reasonableness of his statement penetrated the defensive shell she had built up and she had nothing left with which to fight. With a sob she dropped her arm and leaned back against the door while tears welled in her eyes.

Two long steps took Casey to her side. He put his hand under her arm and led her gently to a chair. Then, to give her time to gather her composure, he busied himself with other things. He shut the door, which had swung open. He picked up the handbag. He took the automatic from her limp fingers and put it inside. Then he swiveled a chair from the desk and sat down, straddling it as he faced her.

"I'm sorry," she said huskily. "And —and thank you for stopping me."

"You were there, weren't you?" he said gently. "He was dead when you found him."

"Yes."

"Who was he?"

"Sir Eric Kirkman."

"And he was in the British navy?"

"He was a captain—retired."

"You came over with him. You came to ask me for the picture on his account, not on your own. Why?" He offered her a cigarette as he spoke, and after a slight hesitation she accepted and he held a light. After that she began to talk in a low even voice without further prompting.

"Sir Eric had rather a bad time when war was declared," she began. "No one would have him and naturally he was furious. He'd been in the Battle of Jutland, you see—he was on the *Barham*—and he came out of it with his life and that's about all. A shell splinter tore away part of his chest and most of one thigh, and he's been practically an invalid since then. But now we're at war he just had to do something and he stormed about the War Office until Alan got busy and finally managed to wangle something for him in naval intelligence."

"Alan?"

NANCY ALLISON said, "Alan is his son," and spots of color came back to her cheeks. "He was a cadet at Dart-

mouth during most of the first war and now he has a ship of his own—a destroyer—and of course that made it all the harder for Sir Eric to stand idly by. He could have had a berth of some sort in the Home Office but it would have been a courtesy desk job and he knew it. The job he took was a courtesy assignment, too, but it was Navy and that made a difference.

"Well"—she sat up, sparks kindling in her eyes—"he surprised them all. They didn't pay much attention to him and so when he did get a bit of information that seemed promising he followed it up alone. In the end he was instrumental in breaking up an important espionage group. One of the men arrested was the head of the bureau and certain documents were found that not only contained a list of agents operating here in your country, but information about their objectives and methods of operating. He had copies of these documents —and some photographs—with him."

"And somebody found it out," Casey said.

"He was to deliver them to someone from the Embassy staff tonight, so that our intelligence bureau could combat the efforts of these agents, whose job it is to keep track of the movements of our ships. He also hoped that by revealing certain other information to your own naval intelligence he might offer additional facts that would be of vital importance to your country as well."

A spasm crossed her face and tears welled up in her eyes as she spoke. "He tried to save them. He could have given up, but he tried to fight and he had nothing to fight with but one good leg and a cane."

"And a heart," Casey said, and found his throat hard and thick inside. He looked down at his cigarette, mashed it out savagely when he remembered Wade's, "I tried to give 'em an argument, Flash. But they played kind of rough."

A sullen, smoldering rage came over him and the muscles coiled at the side of his jaw. "And where do you come in?" he asked quietly.

"Come in?"

"How did you happen to come over with him? Why didn't you stay at the same hotel?"

"Oh, I'm in the Women's Royal Naval Service."

"What they call a WREN?"

"Yes. We drive cars and do cipher work and decoding—that sort of thing. I was helping Sir Eric."

"And you're in love with his son." Her eyes were enormous on his and he saw the answer there and said: "So you came along to look after him."

"He thought it better that I travel separately and stay at a different hotel," she explaind dully. "He—he loved to be mysterious about things. He was so pleased that he could help. I came to you for the picture without his knowing it. If I had only stayed with him—"

CASEY stood up. "There's an antique shop in town called Radnor's. Ever hear that name?" he asked.

"Why, yes," she said quickly, her eyes widening. "Sir Eric mentioned that name to someone over the telephone once. That—that's where I was going when you came."

"All alone, huh?"

"I had to. I didn't know quite whom to call, and the Embassy men weren't coming until ten, and I knew the police would be around and—well, there are copies of those papers, but by the time anyone could do much about it the agents listed would be able to scatter. And it wasn't only that."

She broke off and he saw that the tears had stopped. She was looking beyond him at something which she alone could see. There was some strange and shining faith in her face but when she spoke he knew this dream of hers had slight basis in reality and he felt again the thickness in his throat.

"Maybe it sounds silly to you," she said, still not looking at him, "but more than anything else in the world I want

the envelope the murderer took. Not for what it contains, but because if I have it no one will ever know that Sir Eric failed. I could tell them he gave it to me for safe-keeping, that I had it all the time. And then Alan and the others he worked with—well—they'll all know he carried on and that after all they made no mistake in trusting him. If I could only do that for him— You do see, don't you?"

"Yes, I see," Casey said.

"Only"—the fire of her desire and imagination went out of her eyes—"I guess there was nothing I could do. I wanted to find Radnor. I was going out to look —don't ask me where. It was stupid of me. I knew it then. There isn't even such a name in the telephone directory."

Casey blinked his surprise. "Are you sure?"

Furrows appeared over his shaggy brows as he pawed through the telephone book and saw that she was right. He tossed it back on the stand, his eyes sleepy in a grim sort of way.

"There's a fellow I want to see," he said thoughtfully, "and after that maybe we can take a look together. Want to?"

"Very much," said Nancy Allison.

BOYLSTON STREET was alive with light and the movement of mid-evening traffic. Around the corner, Lakeland Street was lifeless until morning, its shop windows dark and the sidewalks deserted.

Hoxie's cab swung toward the curb in the middle of a block, stopping before a modernistic narrow front sandwiched between a book store and a milliner's. The windows, closed off by wooden panels at the back and filled with chairs and vases and shawls, mirrored the progress of the cab against the darkness of the street, and across the glass panel in the door was the word *Jerauld's.*

"Where do you see Radnor's?" Casey demanded.

"I don't see it," said Hoxie, "but this is where I took the guy. He got out in front of the book store and when I pulled out from the curb I see him turning in here."

"Could we wait?" Nancy Allison asked.

"Yeah." Casey climbed out, pulling his camera and platecase after him.

Two cars sped by while they were talking, and after Hoxie had driven off Casey saw a man smoking in the doorway of a brownstone front across the street where a *Rooms To Let* sign hung in the window. Other than this they were alone in Lakeland Street.

They lit cigarettes as they stood there on the sidewalk, and it was not until Casey moved through the entrance and up to the door that he noticed a crack of light squeezing past the drawn shade.

"Hah!" he grunted softly and angled around until he got his eye to the crack. Gradually a section of the interior emerged from the shadows and he saw that beyond the darkness in the foreground a light gleamed, its beam focused upon some sort of screen. When his eye adjusted itself he identified a silhouette before the screen as a man—on his knees —doing something to the screen.

"What is it?" Nancy Allison breathed.

"Somebody's in there," said Casey, and knocked loudly on the door. He had to knock again before the lock clicked back and the door inched open, framing a face that had no substance in the shadows.

"What is it?" The voice was gruff, irritable.

"Is Mr. Connolly here?" Casey asked casually.

"No."

"That's funny. I was told he worked in one of these stores. You don't happen to know—"

"No. He doesn't work here. I don't know any Mr. Connolly."

Casey kept one eye on the door. It had opened perhaps a foot during the conversation and he made out certain details—the solid blond face, the deep-

set eyes, the hand that remained steady in the coat pocket, fashioning a hump that pointed straight ahead.

"O. K.," he said. "Sorry to bother you."

Behind him Nancy Allison made a sucking sound. Casey backed a half-step, his eye still on the door as it started to close. He waited until the last instant, until only an inch crack remained. Then, before the lock could click, he drove his lowered shoulder against the door.

The door flew open a foot or so, checked suddenly against the body behind it, bounced, then went wide as the drive of Casey's powerful legs knocked the man over backwards. Carried off balance by his charge he went down on top of the fellow, grabbing for the hands and pocket as he dropped and trapping the gun. He took a wild, futile punch on the cheek, then he was on his feet, dragging the man with him, ripping the gun from the pocket.

That ended it and he asked Nancy Allison if she could lug his platecase into the shop and close the door. He found a light-switch and snapped it on. They went along a thick carpet between rows of miscellaneous furniture and pottery and tapestries to a cleared area at the rear where there was a desk. The single light focused upon a large oriental screen standing a few feet in advance of several others like it.

All this had happened without a sound from the blond man. Even now, as Casey studied the handsome sullen face, he said nothing, but stood immobile, his eyes wild with hate and frustration.

"Take a look through the desk," he told Nancy Allison.

WHEN the girl bent over the desk Casey stepped up to look at the screen, noticing a small easel, a glassful of tiny brushes, a pot of varnish. He felt of the screen, found it sticky to his touch. Then, as he started to circle the blond man, he saw the piece of paper sticking from his coat pocket.

The fellow jerked about but when he felt the thrust of the gun he bit his lip and stiffened. Casey unrolled a thin, tissue-like piece of paper. Upon it was drawn a plan of some sort. He could make nothing of it. It did not seem complete, but rather a part of some larger unit, the central points being designated by numbers. Frowning, he put it on the desk and asked Nancy Allison if she had found anything.

"Yes," she said without enthusiasm, "but—not the envelope."

Casey's lips tightened and he let his eyes move about the room. A topcoat thrown over a chair held his gaze and, moving to it, he put his hand in one of the pockets. Instantly a quick gleam shone in his eyes. Then the lids narrowed and got sleepy and he took out six or seven plateholders. When he had slipped them into his own topcoat pocket he called Nancy Allison over and gave her the gun.

"Watch him," he ordered, and shrugged out of his coat.

The blond man stood perfectly still at first, but as Casey approached his eyes darted from side to side, and he began to back up. He kept moving backward, eyes held by Casey's now, until he touched the wall. Then, with a quick, desperate shifting of weight, he whirled and lashed out with his right.

Casey took the blow on his forearm, grabbed the fist and spun the fellow, at the same time driving his own right hard against the mouth.

"That's for Wade," he said, and caught the man as he slumped, dragging him over to lower him into a chair. "Where's Radnor?" he demanded when the man opened his eyes.

The eyes blinked. For a brief instant fire flashed, but some inner impulse quickly quenched it, leaving them dull and stubborn. Casey slapped him twice, hard, rocking the man's head. He looked over at the girl, who stood watching him with eyes wide and face stiff.

He sighed regretfully, stepped back.

"I guess we've got to wait for Mr. Radnor," he said. "But now I think I know the guy I'm looking for." He paused, seemed reluctant to finish. "Only I think maybe we ought to have some help."

He picked up the telephone as he spoke and called police headquarters. When he was told that Lieutenant Logan was out he left word to have him call this number, and then looked up the listing of the local office of the F. B. I. He knew the agent in charge here, but it did not help because there was no answer.

"I'm glad," Nancy Allison said quietly when he hung up, and he eyed her curiously, not quite understanding, until she said: "Now we'll have to wait right here, won't we?"

"For a while," Casey said, remembering now the goal this girl had set.

The odds against success and the risk involved meant nothing to her. This, it seemed, was a better chance than she had hoped for, and nothing mattered now save that she find the envelope for Sir Eric.

Pity fused his thoughts as he sensed how very real and steadfast was her conviction and how little the likelihood of success. Thinking about this made him ashamed of his own selfishness. Someone had grabbed some of his plates, had slugged Wade in doing it. And he was sore and he'd set out in a bull-headed, they-can't-do-that-to-me mood to get back those plates and pay off. Watching Nancy Allison he knew that he was witnessing a drama of far greater importance than anything he himself had ever done. One man had given his life. This girl stood ready to forfeit hers if necessary—and for something that had no reward beyond that of doing one's duty.

Troubled deeply by such thoughts he stared for a long time at the screen and paints and varnish, and gradually his concern moderated and an enigmatic brightness kindled in his dark eyes.

"Can you watch him all right?" he asked the girl, and when she nodded, he opened his platecase. Held together by an elastic he found the cut filmholders he sought, but he muttered softly when he was unable to locate the filters he wanted.

HE WENT back to the telephone, called the *Express*, and talked with Eddy, one of the office boys. "Go down to my desk, Eddy," he directed. "Top right-hand drawer. You'll find a box of filters. They're all marked. Bring down the ultra-violet and infra-red ones."

He gave Eddy the address, and had started to explain his idea to Nancy Allison when it happened. Actually it happened right before his eyes. He saw the whole thing develop, yet he was powerless to stop it or to give any warning.

One second he was talking to Nancy Allison and watching the blond man in the chair. The next he was staring at a door in the rear wall behind her that had opened a silent foot and now framed the snout of a heavy automatic. Before he could speak the man behind the gun was in the room and a thick deep voice with a snap to it said: "Drop it, lady!"

Casey froze as he saw her hesitate. She stood stiff and straight, brows high, her hand tight on the gun. But she did not drop it. She started to turn.

"No!" yelled Casey. She looked at him and stopped, bewildered and hesitant. "Let go of it!" he ordered. "It's O. K. Drop it."

He relaxed and began to breathe again when the gun thudded to the floor. After that the man in the door took on individuality—a thin, dark man with a long pointed jaw and a scar across his mouth.

"He's the one!" Nancy Allison's voice rose sharp and bitter. "He did it!"

Casey stared, incredulous. No! This could not be Radnor. This was the man Hoxie had described, one of those who had slugged Wade. This wasn't the man who . . . . . Not until then did Casey

realize that Nancy Allison was not looking behind her, but straight ahead.

He wheeled. There, coming through the front door, a key in one hand and a gun in the other, was a squat, dark man with thick-lensed glasses. Casey knew then that the girl was right, for this was the man who had been in the background of his finder when he had taken the picture of Sir Eric.

"Yeah," he said thickly as the man advanced. "It had to be that way. You were the one who didn't dare have your picture printed. You were at the dock to follow Sir Eric, huh? And you sent your two guns to get the plate back. One of them saw me give the plates to Wade and—"

"He did it!" Nancy Allison said again. She hadn't moved and her eyes were still wide. "I saw him come around the corner of the corridor when I went to see Sir Eric."

The squat man's shoulders moved in a shrug. "It was too bad," he said in a voice that was curiously soft for his bulk, a softness that seemed unhealthy and menacing as he continued. "We had little time." He glanced at the girl. "Not until this morning was I notified by radio that Franz had been taken and that you and Sir Eric were due today."

"You murdered him," she said.

"He attempted to struggle." He said this regretfully.

"He was practically a cripple," Casey said grimly.

The man shrugged. "He tried to use his pistol."

"You took the envelope," Nancy Allison said. "You are Radnor."

"Yes," the man said, and there was a certain cold pride in his manner.

From the corner of his eye Casey saw the blond man move. He had seen him retrieve the gun Nancy Allison had dropped, but his attention had been focused on Radnor. He turned too late.

He saw the hate flame in the eyes, the swinging hand that ended in the gun. Nancy Allison screamed and he pulled away—but not enough. The barrel whipped against his jaw and something exploded in his head and he sagged to one knee. Through the hum of noise and the pounding of pain he heard a soft voice say: "That can wait, Philip. Please. We haven't time now. Waldo has the light truck in the alley. Load the screens."

Philip sulked. A pout appeared on his handsome blond face and reluctantly he put away his gun. "I haven't finished this one," he said, and, picking up the brush and varnish pot, resumed his work.

Casey got to his feet, the inflection of the squat man's, "That can wait, Philip," ringing in his ears. It was spoken softly, but with a dispassionate clearness that hit him with a sickening jolt. He looked across at Nancy Allison, looked at her and knew that he had involved her in something more desperately fantastic than he had ever imagined.

There was more at stake here than assault and murder. This time he had stepped out of his class. This was big-league. And when Radnor was ready to leave, Casey was aware that he and Nancy Allison would not be left behind. And yet, somehow, he did not think she minded as much as he did.

HE WATCHED Philip finish with the varnish and put aside his painting paraphernalia. Waldo, meanwhile had started to carry the other screens to the alley. Then Casey remembered something, and, remembering, knew that there remained one chance that he would have to take.

Casually he moved his hand toward his pocket, checking the movement openly when Radnor said: "You will keep your hands where I can see them."

"Sure." Casey shrugged and turned to Nancy Allison. "Have you any cigarettes in that bag?"

He stepped slowly, idly, toward her as he spoke and his eyes signaled as best

they could. She moved her lips to speak when, suddenly, something flickered in her gray eyes, bringing a gleam of understanding and hope. She began again, saying: "Yes, of course."

Casey held out his hand to receive the bag, but she made no move to give it to him. Then a sudden thrust of fear hit him hard.

"Just toss it over," he said quickly.

"I'll get one for you," she said, fumbling with the catch.

Things happened so fast then that only in retrospect could he put together the proper sequence. She stood there very straight and slim, with her shoulders pushed back hard and her young face white and stiff with her determination as she defied her fears.

He took one long step towards her, saying: "No, wait! Nancy!"

Behind him he heard Philip's ugly warning. But he couldn't stop. She had her hand inside the bag now. He reached out to grab it as she tugged at the gun and then, when he saw he couldn't stop her, he lunged forward.

His hand found the bag and his shoulder hit her arm, knocking her down behind the desk. Still moving, he went to one knee and the automatic was in his hand, and something hit the desk throwing splinters in his face and there was an explosion of sound behind him.

He pivoted, gun up. Somewhere in the distance there was the sound of commotion against the background of a crisp, incisive command.

Again a gun roared. Amazed that he had not been hit he fired. A second, louder explosion answered him back and then he saw that Philip had dropped his gun and started to sag toward the floor.

Not understanding, nor knowing if his shot had hit Philip, he saw that Radnor had his hands up. Just inside the back door were two men with guns in their hands and moving in behind them came two more. One was Waldo, his arms raised. The other held a gun against his spine.

"Just hold everything," one of them said while a second started for the front door.

They were hard-eyed, efficient-looking men, these three newcomers, strangers to Casey, so that he stared at them without knowing what the score was until the front door opened and he saw McManus, the F. B. I. agent he had tried to telephone.

Not until then did he look back at Nancy Allison. She had come to her feet. She was staring at Radnor and suddenly something in her eyes reminded him of one more job that had to be done. Quickly, while he still had time, he put the automatic on the desk, stepped up to the man, spun him over behind the desk and let go with a hard left hook.

Radnor went down, toppling over backward, and Casey said, "One for Sir Eric," and fell on top of him. In that same falling movement he arched himself so that he could slip one hand inside the unconscious man's coat. He had jammed the bulky envelope up under his vest before hard hands grabbed his shoulders and a voice said, "Lay off!" and he was dragged to his feet.

"Don't you hit them when they're looking any more, Flash?" McManus said dryly.

"This was an extra-special case," Casey said. "And where've you been? I tried to call you."

"Did you?" McManus cocked one brow and blew out his breath. "We weren't quite ready but maybe it's all right."

Casey, remembering now the man who had lounged diagonally across the street after the taxi had left them on the sidewalk, said, "Oh."

BEFORE he could continue, a pounding shook the front door and when it was opened in popped Eddy, the freckle-faced office boy, with Casey's filters.

"Have they heard from Wade?" Casey asked.

"He's going to be all right," Eddy said. "He's come to already."

Quick relief shone in Casey's dark eyes. "Hah!" he said gratefully, and moved toward his platecase.

"Forget it," McManus said. "No pictures of this, Flash."

Casey saw that argument was useless, but he opened his platecase nevertheless, saying: "But I can get a couple shots of that screen, can't I?"

He knew from the way McManus grinned at him that he couldn't, so at last he slipped on his topcoat and reassured himself by wrapping his hand around the half-dozen plateholders in the pocket before he said, crabbing in a tolerant sort of way: "My pal, huh? O. K. But they've got pictures on them—those screens. Underneath those fancy figures. They ought to show up with the right kind of filter.

"I wouldn't be surprised," McManus said. He picked up the tissue sheet Casey had tossed on the desk. "Harbor defenses," he said. "The screens came in a month ago, about thirty of them. When customs found out they had reshipped a few, we checked up." He glanced at one of the other men. "We've been working it out with naval intelligence."

After that Casey had to do some talking. It took him quite a while, but what he said was convincing and after Nancy Allison had corroborated him McManus seemed satisfied.

"But I still don't get it," Casey said as he finished. "You didn't know about Sir Eric or the dope he had."

"Not a thing," McManus replied. "The English are working on their problems and we're working on ours. It just happens that this time we're bucking the same outfit. Radnor had to reach Sir Eric to protect his bureau—if what you say is true. At the same time he was doing this on the side"—he gestured toward the screen—"for possible future use. And that's where we come in."

He glanced at Nancy Allison. "You'll want to get in touch with your Embassy. If they want to cooperate it'll be a help."

He moved to the telephone and Casey said, "I'll have that cigarette now," and drew Nancy Allison into a corner. He took her bag, opened it, slipped the envelope into it from under his vest. "You'll have to see this thing through, I guess," he said quietly, "but here's something for you."

"For Sir Eric," Nancy said, her eyes shining and her mouth soft.

"For Sir Eric," said Casey, "and for you."